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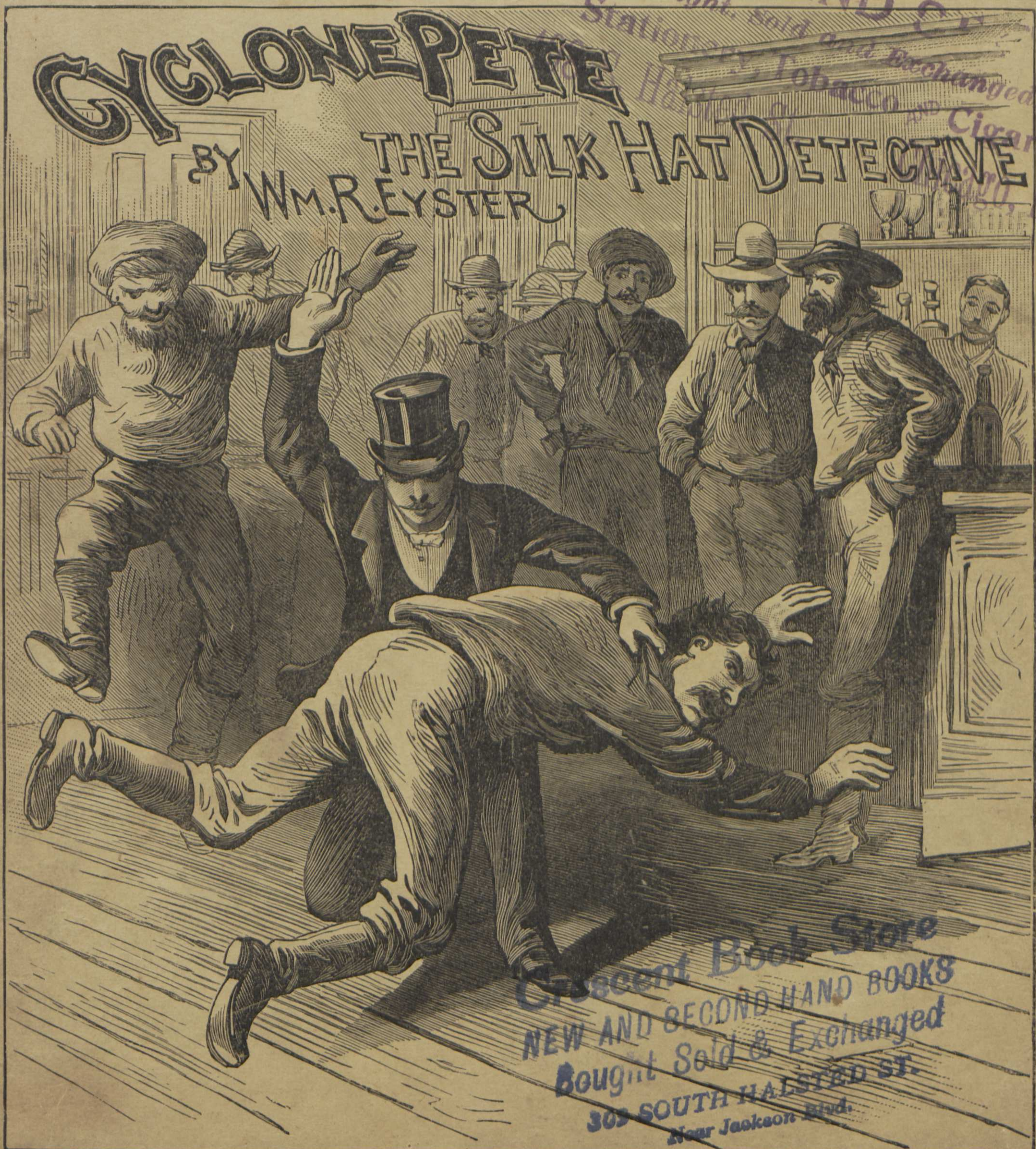
No. 977.

PUBLISHED EVERY
WEDNESDAY.

BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
92 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

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Vol. LXXVI.



WITH A TRIP CYCLONE PETE TURNED THE RUFFIAN OVER HIS KNEE, AND GAVE HIM A SPANKING.

Original
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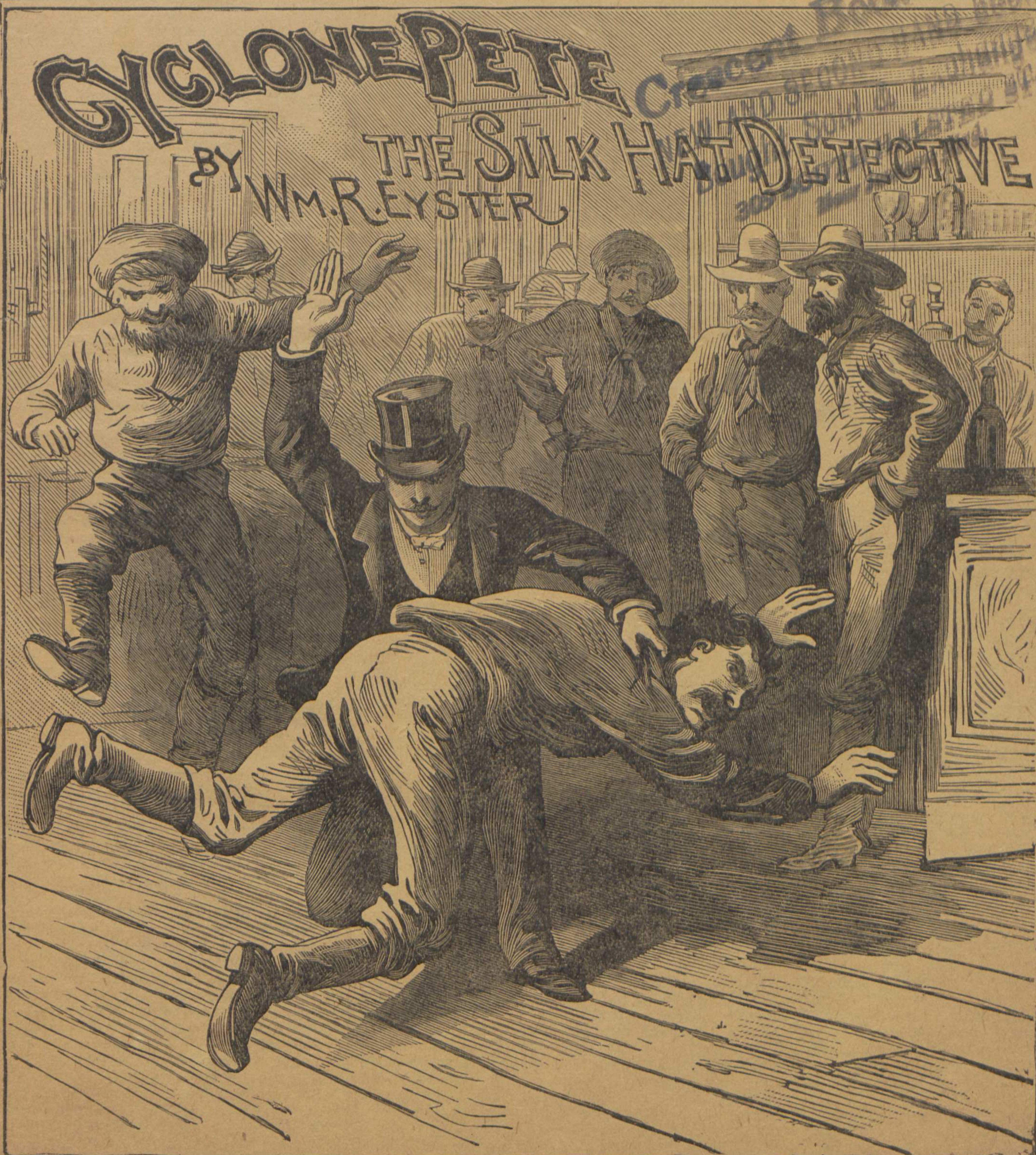
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WITH A TRIP CYCLONE PETE TURNED THE RUFFIAN OVER HIS KNEE, AND GAVE HIM A SPANKING.

Cyclone Pete,

The SILK HAT DETECTIVE;

OR,

The Ever Ready Sport on His Mettle.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "THE DUDE DETECTIVE," "THE ALL-AROUND SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE WAIF AT DANDY BRIGGS'S.

"I must get through."

The young lady wrung her hands as she spoke, and looked the image of despair.

"Sorry, mum, but you've got inter a kentry whar 'must' don't count. We on'y reckon on doin' what we kin. Ett don't look ez though it war in ther wood."

"But, I tell you, there is a life at stake; and I know not what else. My own life, even, may be the forfeit if I fail."

Bandy Burke shrugged his shoulders, and made no answer. In fact, he was more interested in this young lady than he let on, but he was not the sort to wear his heart on his sleeve, and he had spoken to her with evident frankness.

"Money will be no object if I can only succeed. Can you not suggest some way in which I can reach Running Gear?"

"I kin not. Thar's one man ez passes hyer at times ez might make ther riffle fur yer; but he ain't hyer now; and ett's uncertain when he'll git hyer. He ain't bad stuck on Runnin' Gear, nohow. Don't go that way."

"His name?"

"Oh, thar ain't no use ter look fur him. Ef he was about he'd kim up all smilin'. He allers does."

"But could he help me if he were here?"

"Petey'd git a hoss ef thar warn't one in ther hull deestrect. Oh, he'd russel out a team from somewhar, an' take yer over the mount'in a bilin'. That's his style. But, somehow, we ain't built that way. In ther or'nary line ov biz fur us thar jest ain't no team, an' that settles it."

"But this man—what did you say his name was?"

"Petey, mum. Silk Hat Petey; an' jest ez good a man ov his inches ter tie to ez ever stood in shoe leather."

"Then, cannot he be found? I would pay well for it, and run my chance of his being able to help me?"

The station agent and wayside hotel keeper shook his head solemnly.

"Bless yer soul, thar ain't no use lookin' fur him. He ain't that kind. He don't live 'round hyer; but jest when yer ain't lookin' fur him he's all on deck. Sorry he don't know ov yer fix, fur that's jest what he seems ter be livin' fur—ter take a hand in when ther poor an' needy are a sufferin'."

"Well, I am not poor; and what I need is some way of getting over the mountain to Running Gear."

"An' that's jest what yer can't do. You'll hev ter make ther best ov ett hyer tell to-morrer evenin', when ther regular hearse'll be comin' along. Thar's two men hyer now, ez are jest ez bent on goin' ez you are."

"Perhaps they might help me?"

"I rathyer guess not; an' ef they could I'd hate ter see yer go. They ain't pre-zackly got much harm in 'em; but they ain't ther sort you'd like ter hev fur kimpany. They're rough; blamed rough."

"Oh, dear, what shall I do?"

The handsome little lady wrung her hands in despair, and seemed about to break down, but just then Burke pricked up his ears.

In the distance they heard the crack of a whip, and the sound of rolling wheels.

"Wall, I sw'ar!" he shouted.

"Ef ett ain't a speshul kimin', right

now. Reckon ef they don't take yer along I'm no jedge ov sech things. Git yerself riddy. Hyer's light at last."

Sure enough, a special it was, which rolled up to the door; and at once half a dozen men appeared on the porch, as if by magic.

Miss Carmen Carter came out only a fraction of a second later; and as she stared at the vehicle, which seemed to be sent there by a wise and overruling Providence, she was delighted to observe that it contained only one passenger, who was lolling at his ease on the hind seat.

By the time she had taken in that much she was listening to Bandy Burke's excited hail to the driver.

"Hold right on, hyer, Tommy, we bin a wantin' ov yer bad, an' thar's money waitin' fur ye."

"Hev ter wait, then. This hyer hearse are chartered fur ther trip, from Cold Deck ter Runnin' Gear, an' I can't wait fur nobody. Ett's tetch an' go. Ez they knowed ther teams war all out, hed orders not ter stop, on'y long ernuf ter throw off a box fur ye in ther boot. Hussel it out, fur it's a long drive ter Runnin' Gear, an' I got ter make it on time, er git half pay."

"But, say, ett's a female woman ez Dandy dropped hyer from ther cross line. She don't weigh a ton, an' she's got ther rocks ter pay a big figger."

"Can't help it. Take keer ov her yerself; an' git a move on 'bout that box."

The driver spoke short and quick, though in a low tone. Evidently he did not care to have his lone passenger annoyed by hearing of the matter broached by Bandy Burke.

Burke knew enough of his man to know that, after this warning, if he did not rush out his freight there was danger of not getting it until the return trip was made.

He was not the man to overlook his own concerns, or allow his interest in Carmen to imperil the delivery of the box, which he suspected contained the tobacco he was anxiously waiting for.

Without another word he stepped to the rear of the coach and began to explore the boot.

The box was there; and as he slid it out Tommy braced himself and tightened the lines. In another instant he would have been off.

His passenger was the cause of further delay. His head was thrust out of the window, and he seemed to be running his eyes along the porch while he spoke.

"Here, here, my man! See here! What is this I hear? A lady in distress? That won't do. That won't do. Let us understand the situation. I would not be so selfish as to monopolize the entire vehicle when there is another, perhaps as anxious as I am to get forward."

"Jest ez you hev it. You're the boss. Load her up to ther gun'ales ez long ez you pays ther freight; but don't count on me makin' skidule time ef you changes ther load."

"That is all right, that is all right. Of course."

"That's clean white, an' don't yer furgit ett!" yelled a voice from the porch; and it was not a feminine voice, either.

"Knowed he'd hev feelin' fur feller-mortals in deestress. All right, Tim, we'll go 'long with ther gent; an' ef ther time betwixt hyer an' Runnin' Gear ain't eenterestin' ett won't be our fault."

"That's roight."

Two men stepped down from the porch without further hesitation, and approached the coach.

They were not precisely the looking sort of individuals which the passenger, judging from his appearance, would have picked out for companions.

The first speaker was big, black, brawny, brutal looking. He was roughly dressed, his face bore the marks of dissipation, and around his waist was a broad belt, bristling with weapons.

"Oh, but—ah—see here! It was a lady I spoke of. I am not sure I can afford to accept further patronage of the line—

which, I assure you, I am to-day running at my own expense."

"Eh! How's that?" howled the man addressed, a dark scowl settling on his face.

"An' hez it come ter that? Yer 'ain't sure'—an' Buck Barber ther man yer talkin' to. Tim McGonnigan!"

"On dhe shpot."

"Kiver Tommy. He's apt ter be a blamed fool. Now, stranger, are we goin' through, er be ther lead? Speak squar', er take yer medercine."

He swung out one of the revolvers lately at his hip, and covered the dudish-looking passenger, while McGonnigan as promptly put Tommy on a line. It looked very much like a hold up, and the gentleman at the window dodged his head in with a promptness which brought a loud guffaw from Buck Barber's lips.

"Gentlemen, for heaven's sake do not quarrel. It seems to be life and death for me to proceed, and if anything should happen in your discussion I would be the loser. I am sure there is room enough for us all."

Miss Carmen Carter stepped down also as she spoke; and her appearance had an immediate effect—on McGonnigan, at least.

At the sound of her voice he moved to one side, with his hand to the very battered old tile which covered his head.

He was Irish, of course, and he would have been false to his blood if he had not been the acme of politeness when he heard a lady speak.

And, rough and tough as he looked, there was really something of a distinguished air about him as he bowed and scraped:

"Sure, an' a faymale in dishtriss kin count on assistance av Timothy McGonnigan ivery toime. Tr'ist me soide pard an' me for that. Av the jontlemon in-soide goes over the range, sure, an' whoy should that interfare wid your goin' over ther road?"

"Madam, I assure you there need be no difficulty in the case," chimed in the voice from the stage.

"The gentlemen may put me to some inconvenience, but I assure you they shall not discommode you. If Tommy has no objections to make, I would suggest you all crowd in as soon as possible."

Carmen thought she detected the least shadow of a quaver in his tones as he spoke, but she did not hesitate. In her hand she carried a satchel, and at once approached the door of the coach. The passenger flung it open from the inside, and leaped out, raised his hat gracefully, while he motioned her to enter with his free hand, and Tim McGonnigan rushed forward and stood at the step, ready to offer any assistance.

Buck Barber scowled, but said nothing, surveying the proceedings with a look of scorn. When the others had entered he stepped forward with what he intended should be an air of majesty, and clumsily climbed to a place beside Tim. Then the coach, with its strangely assorted cargo rolled off.

CHAPTER II.

HELD UP.

Miss Carmen had not delayed, for fear something might occur to spoil her opportunity, but she had not forgotten the landlord, who, after a fashion, had been kind to her.

She leaned forward as the coach started, and through the window waved back to him a cheerful farewell.

He was standing as she had left him, a puzzled look on his face, his box under one arm, while with his free hand he scratched his head dubiously. The last glance Carmen had at his face was not reassuring, but she had embarked, and whether the trip was to be for better or worse time alone could tell.

She settled down once more in her seat, drew over her face the veil which was almost a necessity to protect it from sun glare and alkali dust, and for a few moments seemed to close her eyes in

thanksgiving over the miracle which had happened in her behalf.

To most persons she might have given the impression of being rather timid and shrinking, now that the excitement in regard to her further progress had worn off. It might even have seemed to a careless observer that she was exhausted by the reaction.

Such was not the case.

Miss Carmen was very much alive; and though these were new scenes, and new men, she was studying them critically from under the shelter of her veil, and from between her half-closed eyelids.

Of course the young gentleman who had chartered the stage for himself, and then so generously come to her relief—under the revolver of Buck Barber though it was—first claimed her attention.

Elegant was the word she mentally applied to him.

His face was clean shaven, save for the narrow, pointed mustache which scarcely shaded his upper lip, and there was a "spic and span" appearance about him that might have proclaimed him just out of a bandbox, had it not been for the traces of travel, which even careful effort had not been able to subdue.

He rested carelessly in the corner of the middle seat, his face half turned, so that she could obtain a side view of it, and the hand which rested upon the back of the seat was well kept and white. A light traveling cap was drawn down over his forehead a trifle, but she could guess that his forehead was broad and intelligent. His whole appearance seemed to say he was a young man of wealth and some social experience, who, if he was traveling toward Running Gear for anything beyond amusement, was doing it in the interests of capital rather than of labor.

That he viewed his companions, who had seated themselves together on the front seat, their backs to the horses, with some disquiet, was an impression rather than a belief. He did not shrink from their somewhat contemptuous glances, but tried to ignore them altogether.

It was because he seemed to not quite succeed that Carmen mentally drifted to the opinion he was uneasy over their presence; and it was this which caused her lip to slightly curl as her glance passed him, to rest on the occupants of the front seat.

She had heard of the chivalry of the West; here she had an example of it.

Buck Barber's appearance has already been sufficiently described; and his companion did not suffer, one way or another, by a comparison.

They both seemed chips of the same kind, though nationality and early training had marked each distinctively. Tim was short and squat, with a low forehead, fringed with short, red hair.

He had a red nose, a red beard, his face was freckled, and his gray eyes were small and beady.

Of the two he was by far the more deferential, and it is barely possible that Buck Barber would have seated himself less quietly had it not been for his restraining influence.

At all events, they were all on board, and the coach was away. For the present there did not seem to be much to grumble at.

Neither was there much opening for general conversation. The two talked together in what was intended to be a low tone, though in course of time it grew to be somewhat boisterous.

By and by Buck caught, or thought he caught, the eye of the young man.

"Say, sonny, hope yer ain't takin' no 'fense. We warn't wantin' a footrace, an' ef Tommy hed put on ther braid whar would we bin? We jest hed ter kiver him—though, in course, warn't a meanin' no harm unless he got one ov his stubborn spells. An' it war ther same thing with you. Didn't mean a blame thing by it, 'cept that we hed ter go on

with ther hearse, at ther reesk ov bullets."

The young man nodded gravely, made a light gesture with his ungloved hand, but said nothing.

"Hope yer don't feel it war 'tended as a insult. Bigger men ner you hev' caved when Buck Barber spread his lay out; an' no one thinkin' ary ther wuss ov it. Bandy knowed how it war, an' Tommy didn't even make a kick."

"Certainly, certainly. That was all right. No offense whatever. Only too glad to be of service to fellow-travelers. It is not far to Running Gear, and I can put up with some slight discomfort for the sake of a charitable action."

"Oh, come now, w'o's talkin' 'bout cherity? Ain't I got my ticket, all straight an' squar, ez reads clean through ter ther city? I ain't busted yit, an' when Buck Barber ain't dead broke he allers pays his own way; an' that ov his pard, too. Ain't it so, Tim?"

"It's roight ye are."

"Yes, yes. Say nothing about it. Of course, I am honored by your presence."

The young man spoke hastily, for the voice of Buck Barber was rising, and it did not require much judgment to anticipate an explosion if the theme was continued.

Buck quieted down, however. A tug, slyly given by Tim McGonnigan, had more influence than a whole host of words would have done.

At the same time his manner became more offensive than ever, for he looked at his entertainer with a scorn that might be natural under the circumstances.

"In course yer be. Let her go at that; I ain't a crowdin' ye. My name are Buck Barber, this are Timothy McGonnigan, ez no doubt yer heard back at Bandy's; but strikes me yer hev furgot ter interdoose yerself. Ef it's a fair thing, an' won't do yer no harm, we'd like ter know yer name. Down at Runnin' Gear yer goin' ter cut a big swell, we kin see that, an' when we hear ov it we wants ter say, that chap are jest our solid friend."

Something like a flush rose on the face of the young man, but he restrained himself.

"It is not likely that a traveler and a wayfarer will attract much attention in a town like Running Gear. I am modest, gentlemen, very modest, and don't expect to intrude."

"But yer name, cuss it; yer name? Yer ain't ashamed ov it, be yer?"

"Of course not, of course not. Simply Smith, gentlemen; simply Smith. Philadelphia Smith, if that conveys a better idea."

"Lawyer by trade? Them's ther kind that town mostly turns out, I've heard."

"Oh, dear no," answered the young man by the name of Smith, with a deprecating laugh. "Only a gentleman of leisure—and some moderate means. I have been thinking of investing slightly in the mining business, as offering the best return for the smallest investment; and I hear there is a mine at or near Running Gear, known as the Cripple's Friend, where a small outlay may be expected to produce large returns. Do you know anything about it?"

"Know it like a book. Don't yer tech it with anything shorter than a forty-foot pole. I'll give yer a p'inter. Me an' my pard hez an interest in ther All Right, an' we'll let yer right in on ther ground floor. What yer say?"

Again McGonnigan gave a twitch at his partner's coat, but this time it was not noticed.

The wolfish look on Buck's face shone out more distinctly. He was on the trail of gold now, and did not perceive how the young man drew slightly away from him as he leaned over confidentially.

"Excuse me," said Smith, hastily.

"It will be in the Cripple's Friend or nothing. I have an opportunity; there which I can have nowhere else."

Buck gave him an angry stare.

"Hey! Mebbe yer thinks it ain't straight goods I'm a givin' ov yer?"

"Not at all, not at all. I have no doubt it is in every way likely to turn out a profitable investment. Only, it would be impossible for me to examine into its merits."

"Reckon yer got legs an' eyes. What's ther matter with lookin' it over?"

"The matter is not as simple as it seems to you, and I prefer not to make an explanation."

"An' I tell yer!"

He began with a rising intonation, but Tim's hand dropped on his shoulder.

"Shtiddy, Buck, shtiddy. Riccolickt dhe faymale."

"I'm rememberin', an' I ain't sayin' more now; but I'll have something else ter say when we git ter Runnin' Gear. Yer ez good ez calls me a fraud. Now, yer got ter give me a show on ther Cripple, er chew suthin' 'sides mess pork. Are ye on?"

He glared savagely at Smith, who nodded feebly.

"Yes, yes, I understand. We'll talk it over; we'll talk it all over. But I am afraid I never will be able to buy."

"We'll drap it jest now, then. It makes me warm, an' when I git warm s'uthin's apt ter burn. You sabbe?"

The domineering tone could not be mistaken, and the young man looked entirely wilted. What he might have said or done can hardly be told, for there was a sudden interruption.

A loud, clear voice shouted:

"Hold 'em in, Tommy, hold 'em in. The toll gate's shut, and you don't pass till the tariff regulation has been complied with."

"Road-agents, by mighty!" exclaimed Buck, his hackles dropping on the instant, while Miss Carmen Carter grew white under the shadow of her veil.

CHAPTER III.

MR. SMITH'S ARRANGEMENT.

"Eh! What's that?" exclaimed Mr. Smith, rising up with an expression of uneasy curiosity on his face. "Toll gate, toll gate! I don't understand?"

"Yer will mighty soon," growled Buck Barber, thrusting his hand into his pocket.

"It's Cap'n Goldbug; and he's after your coin."

"An' yez betther trate him noice. He'll take all ye got, an' ghrumble for more. Av he has to ghrumble too loud somethin' will be apt to dhrap."

Miss Carter said never a word, but cowered back on her seat, apparently understanding the situation by intuition.

Meantime, Tommy had drawn in his team without a moment of hesitation.

Down went the brake, and, still grasping the lines, he held up both hands, in a way which showed it was impossible for him to do any damage if he was inclined to protest the regularity of the proceedings.

Then the same voice was heard again:

"You in there, just listen to me warble. You are welcome to take a snap shot at me, if you please; but don't forget what I may be doing at the same time. We always treat our friends white if they allow it. When they don't, it's apt to be the other way. The first kick from you in there, half a dozen of the boys will let drive, and you know what that means."

Even the innocent Mr. Smith could understand what half a dozen men shooting into the coach with Winchesters would be apt to accomplish, and Buck Barber thrust his head out:

"Say, yer don't think we's all fools, does yer? Git down ter biz. This hyer load are ready ter shuck itself ov its coin only too quick ef yer gives it ther chance. We're in a hurry ter reach Runnin' Gear, so you jist git a move on."

"All right. Spoken like a man of sense. Step out, all of you, and line up. If the contribution fits the occasion there shan't any of you be hurt."

The road-agent stepped briskly forward, where he would be in plain sight of the door from which the passengers

were to emerge, and with a revolver in either hand, stood awaiting their movements.

Miss Carter may have been excited—perhaps a little terrified—but she was not confused.

She hesitated a little, to be sure, but that was because the circumstances were strange, and she hardly knew what to do under the conditions.

She looked at Mr. Smith.

He had drawn a cigar from his pocket and placed it in his mouth. Though unlit, it seemed to give him comfort. He glanced around at her, and she caught his eye.

He seemed to understand her, for he shook his head gravely.

"You might drop your purse on the floor, but I am afraid it will do no good. They will demand strict account from every one of us, and if it is not given they will search until they find. I would take it cheerfully, if I thought it possible to defend it; but I prefer to insure the amount as it is. If you meet with a loss, call upon me at Running Gear, and I will make good any ordinary amount. Our lives here are worth more than our money."

He spoke so calmly that her respect for him was considerably increased. She slipped the purse back into her pocket, and followed him out of the coach.

The young man with the pistols was waiting for them.

Although his face was thoroughly masked, it was not hard to see he was perfectly at his ease, and had no thought of either resistance or danger.

Of course, the presence of personal friends in the background had something to do with this. They were watching closely, and were ready to shoot at the drop of a hat. As they were crouched down, so as to be barely visible, they had a decided advantage in case any one of the passengers had been inclined to take a snap shot in their direction.

While the chances were largely against any of them being in danger, they were in good position to riddle the first person who showed resistance.

"Now, then, old man, we'll begin with you, and the rest can be getting ready. Shell out."

Buck Barber did not hesitate.

He dropped his available wealth into the outstretched hat without a murmur.

"I'll turn my pockets wrongside out ef yer wants to see their bottoms," he growled, his hands resuming the elevated position they had taken when emerging from the coach.

"Not at all necessary. That looks just about like the pile we ought to expect from a gentleman of your caliber. Next!"

Tim McGonnigan followed suit; and it came to the turn of Mr. Smith.

He was conscious that the barrel of the revolver in the right hand of the outlaw lay right in line with his breast, and that a single suspicious movement would cost him his life.

He drew out his purse—then, a wallet, also.

"Gents, you can have it your own way, but I would propose a little arrangement which will be for the benefit of both of us—money in your pocket, at least."

"Drop your sequins, and do your talking somewhere else," was the stern answer.

"Certainly, so far as the money goes; but about my little proposition. Will you not listen to it?"

The weight of his contribution, as he dumped it in the hat, seemed to mollify the road-agent.

"Drive on, and be quick about it."

"Unfortunately, I am a stranger at Running Gear, and will be at, ah—a great deal of inconvenience if I arrive there entirely impoverished. If you will kindly loan me a hundred, for present purposes, I shall be happy, immediately on receiving the remittances I shall send for, to mail you twice the amount, to any post office you may choose to mention."

The road-agent was not as irate at the proposition as Buck Barber had expected to see him.

It sounded altogether too comical, and he looked the speaker over.

"Say, young man, about how much is there in that wad of yours?"

"I should say in the neighborhood of five hundred dollars."

"All right. Terms accepted, as between one gentleman and another. Help yourself. I'll let you know, hereafter, how to even up. But I tell you, fair and square, we will be watching you, and if you try to leave the town without settling, you will be a dead man before you get this far on the road. Now, miss."

Smith had carelessly extracted a hundred dollars from the wallet, and tossed the remainder back into the hat. Carmen stood last in the line, and it was her turn now.

She had not seemed to attract any more attention than the rest. She was simply a passenger, no more, and no less.

Again she produced her little mine of wealth, and extended it with a hand which did not tremble.

To her surprise, the road-agent did not approach, but stood regarding her closely through the eyelet holes in his mask.

"Excuse me, miss, but, your name, if you please. When the contributions are at all liberal we are apt to distinguish in favor of the sex. The sum total seems to be a fair average to-day."

It was a clear laughing voice, and one she would never have believed belonged to an outlaw. Why did he want to know her name? She looked at him as he spoke and touched his hat with something she could not help but think was a knightly grace.

"Your name?"

This time the question came more sternly—a command rather than a mere request.

"Carmen Carter."

Before she knew she was speaking, the answer came.

"And your purpose in this region? It is no place for one like you."

"I expect to find my brother at Running Gear."

"Your brother, ah! Well, luck go with you. I am sorry I cannot aid you in your search. All ready with the mail, there?"

"Riddy we be."

Unobserved two of the men had been searching the coach. The mail pouch had been slit, and a hasty glance had been taken for registered letters.

"All right, then. You passengers climb in. No nonsense. It's time you were getting out of this."

Without undue haste, and yet without hesitation, the passengers availed themselves of the permission.

"Now, Tommy, let her roll; and give my love to them all at Running Gear. I'll be along that way myself, some day, and when I do I'll make the burg hum. Ta, ta, and be good to yourself."

The outlaw waved his hand, Tommy cracked his whip, and the hold up was over.

Miss Carmen leaned back in her seat, too much astonished to speak.

Was this the sort of men the much dreaded road-agents proved to be? It might be a mistake, but as a companion on this journey she felt she would prefer Captain Goldbug to Buck Barber and his pard.

Buck was thoughtful. He had lost much of his overbearing method, and was inclined to modesty. He had lost his little stock of coin, but it was not much, and he was not troubled about that.

From time to time he looked over at Miss Carter, and once or twice was on the point of addressing her. Probably the silent advice of Tim restrained him. The Irishman acted as mentor more than once on that journey.

If he did not speak to Carmen, Buck was not altogether silent.

"It gits me, it shorely does," he said,

glaring around as if in search of some one doubting his word.

No one responded.

"I tell yer, it's a huckleberry over my persimmon. He gethers in my poor leetle starter an' leaves me an' Tim ter starve. That's all right. That's biz. But fur why do he chuck back good, hard coin when it's offered him? Say, you Filladefy chap, you ain't a old friend, be yer? Never was a side pard back whar he kim frum?"

"I assure you, the mildness of his treatment is a puzzle to me, also. Explain it if you can."

"It can't be explained. Blast it, it's all a myst'ry."

"Yes, a mystery," echoed Mr Smith; and the stage kept rolling on.

CHAPTER IV.

CARMEN'S MISSION.

Running Gear was a bustling camp, which imagined it was settling down into the staid and sober ways of a city.

To be sure, there were log shacks, and doboys, and canvas huts. The saloons and gambling houses still ran wide open, and every man went armed if he had a revolver which had not been "sent up the spout."

When night came down, and even on the day of rest, when a Sabbath calm should have been pervading the community, there was a surging mass of humanity to paint the town red, or make things hum, as the occasion seemed to demand.

At the same time there were evidences of prosperity and permanency.

There was the Bald Eagle Hotel, which put up a pretentious front of two stories.

There was Clymer's International Bank, supposed to contain a mine of wealth in its vaults.

There was Von Hamburg's Theatre.

There were a dozen buildings which, compared with the rest of the town, seemed almost palatial. And there was even talk of a railroad at no very future day.

Although the advent of the stage in a place so far advanced as this did not attract the absorbed attention it once did, there were always enough loungers around the Bald Eagle to give it a reception sufficiently large to be gratifying to the passengers who arrived.

When Tommy tooled his coach up in front of the door, there were a dozen men in front of the establishment, who evinced more or less interest.

When Buck Barber and his pard, Tim, got out, no one gave them more than a passing glance. They were not strangers in the town, by any means, and as it happened, none of the loiterers were their special friends.

Buck hesitated, giving a glance back over his shoulder.

In fact, he would have liked nothing better than to have had the pleasure of escorting Miss Carmen from the coach to the front door of the hotel.

He had his doubts, however. He was not so thick-headed as to believe that he had made a particularly favorable impression on the young lady, and from what little he had seen of her he was inclined to believe she would not hesitate to tell him that his company was not agreeable if she thought so.

While he hesitated, Mr. Smith sprang out.

As Buck was in the way there was a slight collision; and, strange to say, it was Barber who got the worst of it. Somehow or other he was half whirled around, and forced back. Before he could recover the young man was helping Miss Carter to alight.

"Shtiddy, Buck," warned Tim, as the rough, with a scowl, seemed about to cast himself upon the young man.

"Runnin' Gear wouldn't shtand it. Kape yer shirt on till yez say him again."

"Right ye are, Timmy. An' thar's ther chance fur ther All Right. Come along

afore I gets me mad up, an' sp'iles all show fur a trade."

The two walked away together, leaving Mr. Smith to his task of assisting the lady passenger from the coach.

The loungers were more interested than they had been. The appearance of the young man came near to exciting a laugh; but curiosity and admiration conquered all that when they saw Carmen's face, her veil thrown back, and a look of expectancy in her eyes.

As she glanced from one to another, more than one of the loungers wished she was looking for him; and every eye expressed admiration as, after that momentary pause, she walked gracefully up to the steps, where she was met by the landlord.

If she had hoped to see any familiar face, evidently she had been disappointed, and her mouth seemed to half open for a question as Pembroke Potter bustled forward.

She looked straight into his eyes—and the question died on her lips.

Why, it would have been hard for her to have told, for, with the exception of her fellow-passenger of the name of Smith, he was the nearest approach in appearance to the style of person to which she had been accustomed.

He was of medium height, well dressed, carefully shaven, and as polite as could be wished for. Evidently, the world had gone prosperously with him.

But there was a hidden light in his hard, green eyes, of which Carmen seemed to catch a shadowed reflection; and instinct bade her beware.

She noted, too, that as his eyes shifted from her to her companion his lips suddenly compressed a trifle, and she was not certain but what he gave a slight start. Did he know his man; or, was his presence simply disagreeable?

"A moment, if you please," Potter said, bowing low as he ushered the two into what passed for the waiting room and parlor of the establishment.

"Of course, miss, you will want a room; and as we had no notice of your coming, it will take a few moments to prepare one for you; five minutes, perhaps. It is simply a shift of a little dunnage and a few necessary changes. Excuse me."

He bowed himself out, leaving Carmen to wonder what sort of accommodations she had fallen upon. Glancing at Mr. Smith, she saw he was looking after the landlord with a strange smile curling around his lips.

"I am afraid I prefer Mr. Burke and his nondescript quarters, where you found me," she said, in a low tone.

"Perhaps I wrong him; but on sight I so distrusted him that I could not ask the question which was on my lips, and which was the first thing I thought I would say when I reached Running Gear."

"And perhaps you are right. Can I help you to a solution?"

"I do not think you can. You are equally a stranger with myself."

"True, yes, ah! But I have greater facilities for getting acquainted. Yes, certainly, miss, ah, if I can be of service, command me."

"I came here to find my brother, Archie Carter. I had faint hopes of his meeting me when the stage arrived; and I expected that, through the landlord, I might obtain some trace of his whereabouts if he was not in the town. Why, I know not, but I dared not ask him the question."

"I know nothing about this man, but you were right to follow your instincts. Keep quiet. I will get an answer for you, and it will be the truth. Keep silent, or give what reason you choose for your presence, save the true one. Hush."

Pembroke Potter returned as silently as he had departed, but the quick ear of Mr. Smith detected his coming.

He entered just in front of a girl of twenty, perhaps, who was cleanly if roughly dressed.

"Mary will show you to your room

now," he said, pointing to the girl, who nodded in a confused way, something almost like a blush appearing to deepen the hue of her naturally florid cheeks.

Without a word Carmen followed, though she waved a parting to Mr. Smith.

"Relation?" asked Potter, tersely, with an upward motion of the eyes.

"Traveling acquaintance," answered the young man, with as much brevity, as he turned toward the office.

His baggage had already been established there; and now he proceeded with particular care to remove traces of travel. In a few moments he was as spick and span as he could hope to be, and was ready for whatever the fates would send him. Without asking a question, he strolled out on the street, and did not reappear for an hour—when the bell was just about to ring for supper.

He applied himself again to the tin basin and water bucket, which delayed him a trifle. When he entered the dining room, under the guidance of one of the employees of the place, the seats at the table were nearly all filled, but Potter met him, and was escorting him to a place which had been turned in for him, when suddenly, brushing past in a careless fashion, Buck Barber strode along, drew out the chair, and seated himself just as Pembroke Potter was motioning Mr. Smith to the place.

That there was intentional insult in the act the landlord very well knew if his guest failed to realize it. The hand of the desperado was close to where he was supposed to carry his weapon, and carelessly though he seemed to move, he was actually on the alert.

Pembroke's own hand dropped toward his hip, but on the instant Smith touched his arm.

"Excuse me, ah. I see a vacant seat at the other end of the table, and near the young lady. Perhaps it would be better to take that."

Without waiting for an answer, he glided there, and slid into the chair as unconcernedly as Buck had seemed to do.

The fancy had struck him that Potter had intended the place for himself, while the two passengers were to be kept apart by placing them at separate ends of the room.

Under the eyes of Pembroke he said nothing, but applied himself to the meal in a way that showed his appetite was remarkably good.

After a time, however, he found occasion to whisper a few words:

"Your brother was here a few weeks ago, calling at the post office. He must have left immediately, and since that has not been seen. May learn more when I inquire further. Say nothing now."

Why she hardly knew, but the advice seemed good to her.

The intelligence came with a shock, but nothing more could be learned by questioning; and there was an inward feeling that the less her intentions were known in this house the better it would be for her.

On the face of the thing the idea might seem folly; but behind was the presentiment. Silently she finished her meal and went away to her room.

Mr. Smith was not so reticent.

He gave another adjustment to his clothing, grew sprucer than ever, and then inquired of Jack Potts where he would be likely to find a man by the name of Wesley Clump.

"Reckon you mean 'The Chump.' That's what the boys call him here, and I'm staking money on it that they're away off. Owns a hole in the ground they call the Cripple's Friend; and, if I'm not on a dead centre, it's going to be the best friend he ever had."

"A good mine, is it?" asked Mr. Smith, with much apparent interest.

"Good for him. I'm not saying how it will be for the other fellow. He'll soak him yet."

"Oh, ah, yes. But can you tell me where to find Mr. Clump?"

"Not precisely sure, this early in the evening. You can't tell which end he'll

start in on his rounds, but, for an off chance, I'd try the Daybreak. It's handy, and it's hard."

"Thanks. Directions, if you please."

"The first red light. Go a little slow till you get the hang of the place, and don't begin by asking the boys up to drink. They'll rob you if you do. Wish I could go along, but I can't get off till the boss comes. Maybe you could wait?"

"Thanks, awfully. I want to see him before he gets, ah, more than half seas over. Perhaps I could come back for you. Thanks again."

"A cool one, anyhow," thought Jack, as the stranger guest turned away; and he was not half wrong in his opinion, either.

The red light of the Daybreak was in plain view, though it was not immediately on the line of the main street.

Without hesitation Mr. Smith advanced in that direction, and as he approached became aware of the fact that the evening exercise had begun.

Various people were wandering thitherward, while a loud hum of voices floated out on the evening air.

As he came nearer he heard a harsh, raw voice strike up:

"Ther Cripple's Friend are a bloomin' strike,

Whar ther gold rolls out by the chunk,
So crack your heels an' sound yer horn,
Fur hyer kims Wesley Clump."

Then Smith could hear the sound of dot-and-go-one, as a man with a peg leg stumped up on the porch of the Daybreak.

"Just a trifle too late to catch him before he gets at his devotions, but he's not too far gone yet to have an eye for business."

So thought Mr. Smith as he followed hastily through the door. Then he halted a moment to look around. Clump was not visible, but the first person he saw distinctly was Buck Barber, who rose from a seat and took a step in his direction.

CHAPTER V.

BUCK BARBER ON CHANGE.

"Thar's my man now!"

The exclamation of Buck Barber was loud enough to reach the ears of the new arrival.

It also was heard by half a dozen men who were gathered at the further end of the saloon, around the bar. They looked up in some curiosity, to see Buck leave the side of his pard and swagger down the room.

"Knowed you'd kim, pard, an' glad I am ter see yer. It's too late ter show yer ther All Right jest now, but hyer's a lot ov gents ez kin tell yer it's ther thing in sight, an' to-morrer you'll say it are yerself."

He spoke in a blustering tone, and held out a big paw, as though he expected to be greeted with enthusiasm.

At the same time there was a scowl about his eyes—a look which said, "Deny me if you dare."

The advance was not well received. The stranger raised his eyebrows inquiringly, and twirled the pointed ends of his slight moustache after what might have been a nervous fashion, meantime taking no notice of the outstretched hand.

"You hear me," gritted Buck, in a low tone, after a few seconds.

A laugh from the neighborhood of the bar did not make him any the pleasanter to deal with.

"Really, yes; but I am not aware that there are any reasons why your remarks, ah, should be addressed to me. I came in searching for an entirely different person, I assure you."

"Yer did, eh? Yer goin' ter throw off on the All Right, when yer told me yer war lookin' fur a place ter put honest money. Do yer mean ter say I ain't ez squar' ez a die, er that pard Tim an' me ain't ther sort ter tie to?"

"I am not aware of having made any remarks of such a character."

"Oh, yer ain't, ain't yer?"

Buck was about six inches taller than the gentleman from Philadelphia, and he had a fist in proportion to his size.

As he spoke he doubled it up and shook it under the nose of the young man. As yet he made no threat in words, but his tone and gestures were enough to supply the place of a reasonable number of them. The men around the room again laughed coarsely at the annoyance manifested by the stranger, but said nothing, and did as little in the matter. They all knew Buck, and felt no call to interfere.

Only, Tim McGonnigan warningly muttered:

"Aizy, Buck. Ye betther be aizy."

"How kin I be easy when ther leetle runt hez gone back on us so fashion. Fur half a cent I'd mop ther floor all up with him."

"Really, my friend, you are growing importunate, while I am losing valuable time. Say what you have to say, do what you have to do, and be done with it. You are much the larger man, and, I suppose, are accustomed to having your own way in such things."

This time the laugh that arose was rather at Barber's expense. He did not know exactly what to do with the white elephant on his hands. It was plain the young man was not going to show any vast amount of fear, and unless something was done soon the joke would be the wrong way.

Buck was itching for a difficulty, but he had not exactly counted on having to do all the preliminary leading himself.

That laugh determined him, however. He suddenly sprang at Mr. Smith, who calmly waited for the attack, without even putting his hands up to defend himself.

"I got yer," shouted Buck, as his hands closed firmly on the collar of the unresisting noncombatant.

"Now, I'll show yer how we han'le boys ez kim out hyer an' show off their blamed fool style. Up yer go!"

And up Mr. Smith did go.

"Aizy, Buck. Yer betther be aizy," cautioned Tim once more; but the advice was thrown away.

With a gigantic heave and wrench Buck Barber tore the other from the floor, fairly swinging him in the air, and whirled him around his head, turning as he whirled.

Mr. Smith's heels stuck out in a line horizontal with his head, and, like an animated cartwheel, he revolved around Buck as a hub.

Then Buck, suddenly letting go his hold, cast him off at a tangent.

At least, he tried to; but the game did not finish precisely after the fashion he had intended.

At the very instant his fingers loosened those of Mr. Smith caught on. He came to the floor on his feet, with his back humped, and the next instant gave a toss which sent Buck Barber up into the air, turning a complete somersault.

The shock would have broken the grip of most men, but Mr. Smith never let go.

"Two can play at this sort of game, my friend," he calmly remarked.

"You've had your little fun; now I'll take my turn. Here, hold his guns for him, somebody."

With a swift motion, he stripped off Buck's belt and tossed it to the nearest man, who caught it deftly.

"An' av yez can't be aizy, Buck, be az aizy az ye can!" shouted Tim, without ever offering to interfere.

In fact, it looked very much as though he was enjoying the course things were taking as much as any one. Buck was all abroad now, and had no time granted him in which to recover. With a wrench and a trip Smith turned the astounded man over his knee, and with his open palm deliberately gave him a spanking.

Then Smith whirled him over and jounced him down to a sitting posture, shaking his finger in his face.

"Now, little one, you have had your

way and I have had mine. We quit even. If you try to begin it again, I'll shoot you dead. If you cannot keep quiet, emigrate. I am here on business."

He spoke a little sharper, perhaps, but there was no great change in his tones. Buck stared up for a moment in helpless amazement, and while he was staring Tim McGonnigan slouched to his side.

"I towld yez to be aizy, but yez wouldn't moind. Now, come along with me. Sure, an' it's not your noight out."

He had Barber's belt over his arm, and caught his pard firmly by the shoulder, raising him from the floor. The fellow was too bewildered to object, and followed out without a word, while a great shout arose from behind them. No one there was sorry to have witnessed the downfall of Buck Barber.

Half a dozen men stepped forward with congratulations and invitations to drink. "Thanks, gents, all," Smith answered, with a shake of the head.

"Like the dear departed, it's not my night out. I'm here strictly on business. I thought I saw Wesley Clump enter here or you would not have had the pleasure of my presence."

"Good fur him! He's right hyer. Wesley, kim forth!" shouted several.

"A royal mine are ther Cripple's Friend, An' ther strike war made by a chump; He's allers around when his name are called, An' his name are Wesley Clump."

The doggerel was roared out by the same voice Mr. Smith had heard when approaching the Daybreak; and the same timber-leg pegged across the floor which he had heard come up on the porch.

The meeting was not particularly cordial. For an instant the two stood gazing at each other. Then Smith spoke.

"I believe you are the gentleman I have had some correspondence with in regard to the Cripple's Friend. If you are of the same opinion still, I am here for business."

"He'll never shirk when he's giv' his word, You bet he's solid and hunk, No better lives than that same man Which his name are Wesley Clump."

The poetical answer was sung to the same old tune, which hadn't quite the melody of a saw filer's squeak, and Smith's face showed a slight trace of annoyance. He might even have made some unkind remark about that same Wesley Clump had it not been for one of the loungers, who spoke up:

"Sorry, stranger. Ef yer wants to talk biz yer kim three drinks too late. He allers gits that way. Git three more inter him an' yer git him down ter reason."

"Thar's manny a man 'd drap a tear!" began Wesley, in the same rough chorus.

"For Heaven's sake, let up on that!" exclaimed Smith, seizing the hand of the man with the wooden leg.

"Your neighbors probably know you better than I do. Come up to the bar and drink at my expense till you get sober. Gentlemen, will you join us?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY OF THE "CRIPPLE'S FRIEND."

The procession to the bar was made, in spite of the warning given by Jack Potts; and, really, the advice of the young sport at the Bald Eagle seemed not to have been needed.

Perhaps he had drawn the characters of the patrons of the house with too bold a hand.

At any rate, Clump was carried past the singing epoch, and suddenly became a brusque, almost surly, man.

"You want to talk about the Cripple's Friend. All right. This is no place. Come with me."

"Where?"

"No matter, so it's private. My shanty, I reckon."

"Very well, if it's not too far, as well there as anywhere. Lead on. I'm with you."

Each man had altered his tone somewhat, though neither seemed to notice it. They went out of the room together, Smith smiling and yet earnest; Clump stumping along by his side without another word.

The cabin of the timber-legged man stood off by itself, and at some little distance. When reached, Wesley led the way in and lit a lamp.

"You've come, have you?" he rasped, throwing himself into a seat.

"Come I have; and ready for business. What is it you want?"

Clump looked anxiously across the table at his vis-a-vis, and for a moment did not speak.

He brushed his hand across his eyes once or twice, and seemed to be trying to read the face of the other.

"You need not hesitate. I am the man. If you wish I can show you your letter."

Wesley held out his hand and nodded. He did wish that very thing. When an envelope was placed between his fingers he silently drew out its contents and glanced at the writing.

Next he lit a match and held the paper by one corner until it was nearly consumed. The still blazing remnant he threw on the floor and watched it until it had turned to a black, fluffy char.

"Your work's done. How much does I owe yer?"

Nothing seemed to surprise Mr. Smith. He leaned back in his seat and watched it all with a smile on his face. When he answered it was without astonishment or regret:

"The one-half of the Cripple's Friend."

"What? Say that again. The one-half? It may be worth a million."

"So much the better for me."

"You're crazy."

"Not as nearly so as you may think. I will simply step into your late partner's shoes."

"It—it can't be done," said Clump, stammering slightly. "And if it could, what have you done to make such a demand as that?"

"You asked me to come here to ferret out a mystery. The work has already cost me seven hundred dollars, or will when I settle my score with Goldbug. That is something."

"I could fix that, and pay you something reasonable besides."

"When I take hold I never let go. You have given me a clue already, though perhaps you do not possess it yourself."

"A clue! How? What do you mean?"

"You wanted to learn what had become of your late partner, who left the camp and never came back. You had nothing but the mine, and would give me an interest in that. Now, you offer to pay me a thousand dollars and stop the search."

Smith paused and looked his man sternly in the eyes.

"Well?"

"Since then you have found some one who claims the share of your late partner, who is wealthy enough to advance the thousand if you demand it, and whom you do not care to fight."

"False, all false."

"But, if it was true, that would be the man who could tell where your partner went. All I have to do is to watch and see him arrive. If you wanted to shield crime, you ought not to have been so previous. Who is your partner in the Cripple's Friend at the present time?"

"No one. You're all wrong. I'm a cripple myself, but if you don't take that back I'll show you what I can do. Get out of this. You come here to blackmail, and I can prove it."

He grew excited as he spoke. If he had not seen the finish of the affair with Buck Barber at the Daybreak he might have made an attack, cripple though he was. But he knew that whatever appearance this man might put on, he was dangerous when aroused and full of resource.

"Oh, no, I have simply said I would quit for the half of the mine. That was to

try you. I have said that I never let go. I do not intend to now. I can wait."

"And charge whoever buys from me with murder. It is blackmail, I tell you. If no one else dares buy, or will buy, you think you will get what may be worth a million."

"Time will show. By the way, what was that pard's name?"

"Find out if you can," chuckled Clump, changing his aspect with a suddenness that was almost startling.

"Prove that I had a pard. There was only one bit of writing in the world to show it, and I have just burned that."

He pointed down to where the black cinder of his letter lay on the floor, and then crushed it with his one natural foot.

Smith tipped his high hat back and passed his hand over his brow. It was the nearest approach to indecision he had shown. When he spoke it was in a lower and more thoughtful tone.

"I am not sure but what you are the guilty man yourself. It would be a neat dodge to ask me here to ferret out your own crime. The work must have been done thoroughly well. Yet—murder will out."

"It is a lie. There has been no murder done at all. Since I wrote you the man I wanted you to search for has been seen—just after I sent the letter. I can prove it. No, sir. Men nor angels shall swindle me out of the Cripple's Friend. I was a fool to be frightened at a shadow. I am a fool no longer. Go!"

His talk seemed like the incoherent raving of a madman; and some men would have indignantly rejected it all; others would have laughed.

Mr. Smith did neither.

He was following the whole of it, and, strange to say, he saw the line of truth running through it all. Crooked, here and there, but Wesley Clump was all the time saying words that, though they might seem contradictory, had certain truths behind them.

"Thanks again. You have given me a valuable hint. I know where to look, and what for. When I have found out the whole truth I will call again. Meantime, perhaps you might tell me what has become of Archie Carter?"

As he spoke he was surveying the man of the wooden leg with apparent unconcern, and he gave no evidence of surprise when Clump shrank back as though under a blow.

"Had you there, had I? Well, so long. It seems there are some things for you to know, and me to find out. I'll get there, and then let you know."

Without waiting to see what was the result of this parting shot, Mr. Smith turned and left the room.

The result of the interview was not altogether unsatisfactory, unexpected as it had been. It is true he had come there in the first place at the instance of Wesley Clump, who now intended to repudiate the whole matter. But he had got on the trail of what he thought was a crime; and in such cases he never let go as long as a hope remained, or the criminal was uncaught.

He intended to ferret out not only what the crime was, but who were responsible. With Clump his identity was no longer a secret, but that did not trouble him. It was possible for him to take some other cover if need be, and he was a man of many resources.

"I have had Clump's story," he thought to himself; "now, I must have that of the young lady. Unless I am widely mistaken, the two will fit together."

Too much interested in his thoughts to make an evening about town, he turned toward the Bald Eagle. As he neared it he saw there was some excitement in and around the house. Men were hurrying thither; and when he came up some one was saying: "Are yer sure she's murdered?"

"Who—murdered?" he asked, without waiting for the answer.

"Young lady ez kim in on the hearse. They say she's bin robbed an' killed."

CHAPTER VII.

A DISAPPEARANCE.

Sharp as he thought himself, there had been some things going on about him which Mr. Smith did not suspect. Had he known it, it might not have made him uncomfortable, but he would have been on his guard.

When he went out from the Daybreak, side by side with Wesley Clump, he gave a quick glance around through the night, and saw nothing suspicious. He gave the same glance around just before he entered the cabin.

Nevertheless, he was followed; and there was an unsuspected watcher at that interview.

Buck Barber and his pard went out a little before, one of them, at least, in no good humor. When Tim handed him his belt, Buck's first thought was to go back and have it over after a different fashion. If it had not been for McGonnigan he would have made his appearance again in the barroom, and he would have come with a drawn revolver.

Tim threw a restraining arm around him.

"Whist, now. It's no use, at all, at all. Didn't ye hear me say it wor not your night out? Be aizey, now. Sure, an' Oi had an oydea all along Oi had s'ane the spalpeen befur."

"Purty time ter be tellin' me ov it now."

"Betther late than niver. Sure, an' av he's the mon Oi think he is he's a touch above your thrick."

"I'm a good man meself, an' I don't take water for the best that stands on sole leather. Keep your clam trap shut if you want to; I'll go back and have it out with him, if he was the king-pin shooter of all Arizona."

"That's joust phat he is av Oi'm not mistaken," answered Tim, coolly, and turning his companion's face the other way.

"Av yez iver heared av a bye they called Silk Hat Petey, or Cyclone Pete, mebber ye will be afther knowin' he's a touch above your stoyle. Sure, an' he's a howly cyclone, inny way yez would take him. He's always ready fer anything that comes his way."

"Cyclone Pete! Bah, yer 'way off, Tim. Ef it hed bin him—d'yer think he'd a stood all that stuff in ther hearse?"

"Yis, av it fit his hand—because he could afford to do it. He'd lit yez rowl him in the mud av it made his game. He's sphort frum the ground up."

"Yer knows him, does yer?"

"Niver put oyes on him afour; but Oi'll bate yez two to wan av ye lit him alone he'll show his thrue hand. It's for yer own good Oi'm sphakin'."

"Mebber yer right. Ef ett's Petey himself—an' ett may be—I want ter tackle him a leetle diffrent. Yer a slow man, Tim, but I've found yer a good one ther leetle time I've bin a runnin' with yer, an' ter-night I'll do ez yer sez. Find out, Tim; an' ef ett's Cyclone Pete let me know. To-morrey I'll be ready fur him."

That was the way it happened that Tim was watching alone when the second pair of men came out; and he it was who trailed them to the cabin of Wesley Clump.

He took his place silently at a window, and through a broken glass heard almost every word that was said.

A puzzled look came over his face as it dawned upon him that this man, who called himself Smith of Philadelphia, and whom he thought he recognized as one he had heard of as a high-rolling sport, had been sent for to unravel a mystery, and seemed to be a detective.

He pursed up his lips, and came near to giving utterance to a whistle, but caught himself in time.

Then, he listened more eagerly than ever. He was a shrewd man, and if he did not follow the drift of Smith's thoughts from his words, he was not very far away from it.

Some men would have followed the self-confessed detective, but Tim did not.

He kept his place at the window, and watched Clump like a hawk, smiling grimly under his beard as he saw that he was still shaken by the last words of his visitor.

After a little Wesley seemed to recover himself. He drew up in his seat, shook his fist at the door, and then stamped with his wooden leg on the floor, the raps having a peculiar sound.

Almost instantly a young voice was heard:

"Here you are, right side up!" was the cheerful cry.

The next minute a youngster dropped from a hole in the ceiling, through which he had reached the attic above.

"You heard us?" asked Wesley, his voice sounding strange even to himself.

"On yer life I did. He's smart as a steel trap—say not?"

"Clippers, I've been good to you, haven't I?"

"That goes without sayin'."

"I can trust you, can't I?"

"Every day in the year."

"I'll trust you, my boy. If you throw me down you kill yer best friend; and I know you are no fool. Wait a minute. I want you to take a note for me; and I don't want any one to see you deliver it."

He drew some papers from his pocket and selected a blank piece, which he tore off. With pencil in hand he drew up to the task; but seemed in doubt. Finally he slowly scratched a few lines.

"Here, Clippers, take this."

His voice fell suddenly to a whisper which failed to reach the listening ears at the window; but the boy heard, and nodded his understanding.

"Bet yer sweet life I will," he said, loud enough for McGonnigan to hear.

"He'll have it in five minnits, an' there won't be ary one else ther wiser."

The boy acted as briskly as he spoke. He took the note from the hand of his patron, and almost immediately was gone.

Tim McGonnigan moved just as promptly—when the time came.

Had Buck Barber been in his place he would doubtless have striven to capture the boy, and find out what was in that memorandum—Tim was more interested in finding out to whom it was to go.

"Owld Shtump-an-go-wan knows he can't rache his mon widout bein' sane, but he has faith in dhe bye. Sure an' so have Oi. Whin Oi say where he goes to Oi'll know who is shtandin' in wid dhe game."

The lad was alert, but no Indian could have played the game better than did the Irishman. Clippers turned and twisted, and looked on all sides to make sure no one was observing him, but all the time Tim was on the track.

When, at length, he saw that Clippers had turned his head in the direction of the Bald Eagle he softly slapped his thigh.

"Pem Potter, av Oi iver saw Limerick!" was his thought, and as he could now do it without much danger of being observed, he drew nearer to Clippers, so as the better to keep him in sight.

As he reached the house some time after the detective, the excitement had had time to get to its full height.

What put it up a double notch was the fact that Pembroke Potter had barricaded his doors to the crowd, and had only admitted a select committee to examine the premises.

There was a universal execration of this high-handed proceeding, which was hardly toned down a bit by Potter's explanatory address from the window.

"Sorry, gents, that I can't accommodate you all, but Doc Price, Wayne Clymer, and the marshal are just enough at present. They are all good, solid men, and when they report you can decide what is the next thing in order. But we can't have all Running Gear prowling over my carpets, to say nothing of what

trail. There's more in now than ought to be here for good work."

"Say, tell us all about it, won't you?" yelled the crowd; but Pem had already slammed the window and left them to cool and kick their heels.

As yet, Timothy had not learned who it was that had been killed, and he did not stop to ask questions. Clippers was the individual he had started to keep an eye on, and he did not intend anything should divert him until he had satisfied himself that his suspicion was correct.

The boy trotted up to the porch, heard a few words that, in the excitement, were scarcely intelligible. He asked no questions, but, dipping his head down, so as to be as much as possible lost from sight, he edged his way toward the rear of the building.

Tim followed just as cautiously, keeping him well in sight, though not showing any sign as to what was his true point of interest, and, halting at the corner, had the satisfaction of seeing the boy tapping at a rear window. Almost immediately, he heard the voice of Pembroke. After that there was a little hurried conversation in a tone too low for him to catch. It did not last long; and then the boy turned away, and began to retrace his steps.

"Down foine," muttered McGonnigan, following him with his eyes alone.

"Pem Potter is dhe partner in dhe brush; what can Oi make out av it?"

While he was asking himself the question he was turning back to the Bald Eagle. Now that he had decided one question he was ready for another, and was about to ask the nearest man for an explanation when the rear door opened and the man who had lately come from Wesley Clump's cabin made his appearance, carrying a lantern.

Behind followed the "committee" Potter had named to the crowd.

Almost immediately they began to search the ground, and before long Mr. Smith pointed downward with a sound of satisfaction.

"They're not the kind of fools to carry a dead woman away. Ten to one she is living yet, and if they were any judges she is likely to live. Now, gentlemen, what is the next thing in order? Mr. Clymer, perhaps your advice will go the furthest in such a case."

Mr. Clymer was the wealthiest man in Running Gear, if common report did not err. He was also prominent in everything, and did not shirk his duty.

"The mystery must be probed if it costs ten thousand dollars. Certainly it does not look as though the young lady walked away of her own accord. Her room shows traces of a struggle, and if all that blood was drawn from her she would hardly be in condition to move. If a trail can be followed, it must be done; and for any expenses in the matter draw on me."

Possibly Wayne Clymer did not know before that the number of his hearers had been enlarged, but he knew it now from the volume of the shout which went up.

A moment later they heard the voice of Smith:

"This way! There were several horsemen, and here is where they loaded up the body."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TROUBLE AT THE BALD EAGLE.

As has already been stated, the Bald Eagle was a two-story building—and it was in the second story that Miss Carmen Carter was domiciled.

Though seemingly bearing the fatigue of the journey without undue exhaustion she was in reality exceedingly tired.

Having placed her case in the hands of her traveling companion of the latter part of the journey, she did not stop with that. A note, hastily written, and addressed to Mr. Archie Carter, was sent to the post office by a messenger, and

she promised herself that after supper her inquiries would begin.

After supper, however, she felt less inclined to action than ever, and as she had taken an immediate prejudice to the proprietor, it did not seem best for her to make any inquiries about the hotel.

Hoping, then, that Mr. Smith might be able to obtain the information she acknowledged it was not best for her immediately to seek, she went to her room after supper, and threw herself down on the bed for rest and thought. She had no idea of retiring until all hope of hearing from Smith was lost.

Perhaps she fell into a doze, for the time passed wonderfully fast. Several hours had elapsed.

She suddenly opened her eyes, and at the same moment became aware of the fact that she was no longer alone. Although the door was fastened behind her when the room was entered, there was some one else there.

If Carmen Carter had been a young lady of less courage, perhaps it would have fared better with her just then.

A cry might have alarmed the house or driven the intruder to retreat.

Instead of attempting to give an alarm she rose to a sitting posture and stared around, trying to pierce the gloom. It seemed to her she had left the lamp burning, but it certainly was extinguished now.

All the light in the room was the little that came sifting in through the window curtain from the night outside.

No sound was to be heard in the stillness, yet the impression grew stronger.

"Who is there?" she said, firmly, dropping her feet to the floor, and assuming a standing posture.

Then it was that some one encircled her with an arm, and a broad palm was clapped over her mouth. She was powerless to speak, and almost unable to move.

She did not faint; but a cold chill ran through her as she recognized her absolute helplessness; and that this attack could only be for evil.

It seemed a hideous nightmare; yet it was an awful reality. What chance was there for help to come; and, indeed, was it not so arranged that help should not come? At that moment she remembered her instinctive dread of Pembroke Potter, and would have given the world if she had at least inquired for other quarters.

Perhaps it was fortunate her mind happened to run in this channel. For a few seconds it was taken off of more terrible possibilities.

Then, she knew a crisis was coming and that she would soon face the worst. The muscular arm attached to the hand on her mouth began so to encircle and press her neck that she was held by it alone as if in a vise.

The other arm loosened; the hand was raised; was the blow coming?

There were only a few seconds for thought and action; but for those seconds her hands were free, even if there was not full play for her arms. She threw her hand back in a frantic effort to push away the unknown person who held her, and her fingers rested on the haft of a knife in the belt around his waist.

With desperate speed and energy she drew and thrust.

She felt the point strike a substance which divided before it, and the hand slipped from her mouth, the arm around her waist relaxed. After that, Carmen fainted.

Five minutes later, perhaps, there was a tap; and as no answer came from within, a voice called, in a subdued tone:

"Miss Carter! Miss Carter! Do you want anything?"

The voice was that of Mary, and as she received no answer, the knocking and the question were again repeated.

The uncanny silence which brooded within frightened her, and the domestic began to suspect something awful. She

scurried away to tell Pembroke Potter that she had heard something like a scream from the room occupied by the lady guest, and now could get no response from her.

Potter was not given to making mountains out of molehills; but he acted promptly, returning to the door with Mary.

When he was sure no answer could be obtained, and on trying the door, found it fastened, he burst into the room without the least hesitation.

"The lamp, Moll, the lamp!" he exclaimed, as, peering around, he could neither see nor hear anything of the occupant.

The girl was prompt. Curiosity urged her, while Pem Potter drove.

No Carmen Carter there. The bed showed the imprint of a form, though the covering had not been turned down.

Something else attracted the attention of the man, and he suddenly bent forward, reaching for the lamp which Mary was holding almost at his elbow.

It was a pool of blood.

At sight of that the girl gave a sharp scream, and then stood staring blankly around. If the murder had been done where was the corpse?

Potter's hand was on his pistol; but the puzzle grew. Whatever crime had been committed, it seemed to be complete, and a mystery.

There was no corpse; the door had been locked; the window was shut; and it was only five minutes or so since Mary had heard, or thought she heard, an occupant of the room.

This thing was beyond him, and he knew the sooner he called in counsel the better it would be for him. He went down the stairs three steps at a time.

By good luck he speedily found the men mentioned afterward, and hurriedly told them the story. They went up to the room, while a young man who overheard, with wonderful presence of mind, ran out into the road and shouted.

Mr. Smith managed to get in, but for a time the aroused townspeople were kept out.

The pool of blood was there, as it had been, but it was the doctor who found just one spot on the window frame, after some little search had been made through the house.

That seemed to show the body had been carried away. By whom it was too soon to speculate. The first thing to do was to examine the trail from below

CHAPTER IX.

TO THE RESCUE.

If Bandy Burke had been there to tell of the impatience of the young lady to get forward, and her statement that a life was depending on it—perhaps her own as well—it might have given a sort of a clue.

It would have been easy enough then to say there was some one at or near Running Gear who was deeply interested in her mission, whatever it might be; and that this interest was likely to lead to murder when other methods failed.

No one there had heard her declaration, however, and so it seemed a mystery of mysteries why the body should have been carried off; and, at first, who the young lady could be.

When the marks had been found in the road, and it was certain every one concerned in the black affair was beyond hearing, the investigating committee gathered together for consultation.

"Who was she, what was she doing here?"

It was Wayne Clymer who asked the question. Though it had been heard several times before, it had not as yet received any answer.

"Sure, an' it must have been the young leddy az come in wid us on dhe hearse," interjected Tim McGonnigan, edging up.

"Yes, that was how she got here; but why she came I'll never tell. This gentleman seemed to have something of her

confidence, though I understood they were only traveling acquaintances."

Potter pointed to Mr. Smith, who spoke up frankly:

"Miss Carter informed me that she expected to meet her brother here, and requested me to make some inquiries about him. All I could learn was that he called at the post office some days ago for his mail. At least, that was what I understood. His name is not on the register of the Bald Eagle, or several other places I looked in at, and I have had no time to search further. Do any of you know him—Archie Carter was his name, as the young lady gave it to me."

"I believe I have heard the name," said Clymer, without hesitation.

"I am not sure when or how; but most likely by means of some paper which passed through the bank. I will have a search made in the morning. Ah, what is this?"

Only a few minutes had elapsed since the discovery of the hoofprints, but half a dozen horsemen were already sweeping up to the spot.

They were mostly men who were in town for an evening of it, and had their mounts ready to hand. Sure shooters they were, from the cattle range a dozen miles away, and ready for any desperate sort of a frolic. The leading spirit was a cowboy, well known in the place, who went under the name of Left Hand Billy.

It seemed as though he had already inspected the tracks, for he made no halt.

"Ten ter one it's a bit of Goldbug's work, and if it are we'll foller long enough ter run him to a hole. Git ready, ter turn out ef we send back word. It'll take a leetle army ter handle that gang ef we git it inter a corner."

So he shouted as he went past.

"We'll be with yer," roared back the crowd; while a dozen men spread over the ground, to try and make sure that the fugitives had not doubled back on their original course. One thing was certain. Running Gear would do its duty in regard to the stranger who had received foul play within its gates.

"I must go with them!" Mr. Smith exclaimed; but Wayne Clymer put a hand on his shoulder.

"Time enough for that by and by. You couldn't turn out a better picked party than that behind Left Hand Billy. They know all the ropes, and will follow the trail if it can be done. A stranger would only be a hindrance. When a report comes in it will be time enough for the rest of us to take a hand. At present the best plan will be for you to wait—to see if there is nothing more to be learned here."

"Perhaps you are right. I want to do anything and everything possible for the young lady, but, as she is actually a stranger, I do not know that I am called on to run over the mountains on a quest which will be better done without me. By the way, if you will look the matter up in regard to young Carter it may help. If you have no objections, I will call on you to-morrow and see if you have anything to report."

"All right. Be pleased to have you drop in at my office. Good evening."

Clymer moved away alone, and Mr. Smith stood for a moment in doubt.

The house was overrun with the curious, and it was not likely that searching now would reveal a clue.

The only thing he could think of was that under present circumstances he could pursue his inquiries in regard to Archie Carter without exciting any comment or surprise.

Any one who knew anything about the young man would probably be only too glad to be questioned in regard to him.

Besides that, he knew what a factor chance was in the unraveling of such hanks, and that it was a good plan to go where chance worked.

When he had spent half an hour on the spot, and found he was learning nothing,

he shrugged his shoulders and went out of the Bald Eagle.

As he stepped from the porch to the street he was joined by a gentleman who had hastily followed him out.

"Reckon you didn't find the Chump?"

The question came by way of a starter to the conversation, and Mr. Smith at once recognized Jack Potts, the clerk of the hotel.

He had no objection to the company of the gentleman, and answered without hesitation:

"Oh, yes, I did. And found him started far enough on his rounds to be just where he had to be made a little more drunk, or a little more sober, to get him in shape for business."

"He gave you the song of the Cripple's Friend, did he? He don't often get that way, nowadays, principally for want of funds. Somebody must have been loading him up. Who has he got in tow now?"

"He seemed to be going on his own hook, so far as I could see. I had a hint of his peculiarity, and by inducing him to take a few more, got him comparatively sober, though I don't know what the result would have been if I had kept it up."

"Don't suppose any one else does. The point of saturation has never yet been reached; and up to that the more he takes the better he carries it. Going back to try again?"

"No, indeed. I got through with him, all right. Just going out to look over some of the other ranches. Perhaps I can pick up something in the matter of the Carters. I feel as though I ought to be doing work on the case; but as Clymer vouched for Left Hand Billy, I didn't want to interfere."

"That's right. Billy can carry that end of it; and it don't look as though there was much to be done at this. There is one thing I might have said, but I was afraid of getting a poor devil into trouble. I would have spoken if they hadn't found a trail pointing the other way."

"How's that? How's that?" asked Smith, with a return to his old manner.

"Maybe it don't amount to much; but a little before the thing must have come off I saw somebody, or something, slouching around the house as I looked out of the window. Might have been a man or a boy, might have been a dog. I just saw something; and didn't think of it again until after the racket."

Jack, having mentioned the matter, did not seem inclined to dwell on it. His companion asked no questions; but jotted the fact down for future reference, while Potts rattled on:

"I'm something of a sport myself, and I wouldn't wonder if you wanted to see the sights around town. If you do, I'm with you. It's my trick off, and I've got all night to myself."

Smith laughed genially.

"I don't know that I am a sport at all; but I have no objections to seeing what is to be seen, and I assure you, I am in the habit of taking very good care of myself. I have no place in view, and if you'll keep clear of the Daybreak, which I have already explored, steer the way."

"Ever handle the pasteboards?"

"For amusement only. At the same time, I don't despise a little profit which occasionally comes my way. I have had luck that was truly remarkable."

"Oh, say, if you're going to train 'round town with me I'd like it better if you'd leave that remarkable luck at home. Just ordinary, every-day sort of stuff will do for me, and it suits the gang best of all."

"Tut, tut, tut! You misunderstand me, altogether. It is not the kind that any gentleman could object to. But let that go. What sort of institution do we visit first?"

"Davy's Dream would be about the proper caper. I'm not sure but what you could give me points on getting in there—if you know as much about such things

as I think you do. It carries a trifle too much rocks for a man of my weight."

"First class, eh?"

"Correct you are. 'Way up. Clymer, Carl Von Hamburg, the boss, and that style. They always give a sight for my money when I drop into the game; but it's sort of provoking for them to have to keep tab on the odds and ends after that style when all the rest can roll as high as they want to."

"Lively sort of a place it must be. What is the game there?"

"Anything that strikes the fancy, from flip-at-the-crack to the royal Bengal. You'll see later on. Here we are."

The building which they entered was the best of its class the stranger had seen in the town.

It was quiet almost to silence, compared with an ordinary mining-camp saloon; and its furnishing showed that the rougher element either let it alone, or was on its good behavior when there.

Like many other places of the kind, there were two rooms; and when the two passed through the saloon they found themselves in the apartment dedicated to games of chance.

At the further end was a faro table, in full blast. When Mr. Smith's eyes rested on it he gave a start, in spite of his usual self-possession.

The dealer was a woman; and, more than that, a very handsome one. In addition, she was one he had met under other circumstances. He could hardly believe his eyes, yet he was not the one to doubt the evidence of his senses.

CHAPTER X.

A LADY OF THE PERIOD.

There was no hesitation about Mr. Smith after the first stroke of surprise.

"Excuse me, Jack, but I would sooner try my fortunes with the fair dealer unannounced, though I have no objection to your silent guardianship of my fortunes."

"Keno. But it won't hurt to know she shoots on sight when she gets her mad up—and what she says goes in this burg. If you discover anything irregular I would advise you to discuss the question privately—I can guarantee you a hearing."

"Anything of the kind ever happen?"

"Several parties have made mistakes; I only speak because the time might come when some man like you was convinced that he hadn't, and would be blamed fool enough to imagine he could take the crowd with him. Play your own game, though. And don't worry about the color of your checks. Everything goes here, big or little. It's the fun they are after."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks."

The answer was hastily given, and Smith slipped away from his companion and made his way to the table.

Even yet he had some doubts; but as the eyes which had been bent downward, toward the layout, were lifted, and met his with a gleam of recognition, he could doubt no longer.

"You are right, old man," said the lady, airily.

"I it is, my own, individual self, and I'll shake hands and say howdy later on. Stack up and take a chair if you feel like pulling his claws."

Until he took some means to supply the deficiency left by Captain Goldbug, his finances were not in condition to play a rustling game, but a little trifling in the jungle would be exhilarating; and Mr. Smith was not unaware that there are a few recorded times when a shoestring has run out into a chain cable.

He nodded, with a brief sentence or two, which should not too much distract the lady from the business in hand, and seated himself in the chair one of the sitters was just relinquishing. Ten dollars' worth of chips was the capital with which he proposed to tempt fortune.

Somewhat to his surprise, he found himself elbow to elbow with Mr. Wayne

Clymer, who was playing against the bank after the steady, cool fashion he did everything else.

At a glance Smith would have said he had been losing; yet the pile of chips beside him looked fairly corpulent, and there were no signs among the other players such as are observable when there is a pronounced winner or loser in the game.

A look at the layout showed the stakes were still moderate. Something else was the matter with the banker; and the stranger hardly thought it was trouble over the affair at the Bald Eagle.

What was it, then?

Time would show, and he settled himself to the game.

The deal was not very far advanced, and the cue box showed there were four queens still in the box.

He dropped a couple of dollars worth of chips on the queen, and looked across at the dealer:

"I wouldn't mind taking three to one that it won't be the queen of hearts. Are you open for a bit of side nonsense?"

"Tommy, put up three hundred," said the lady, with a face as cold as a bit of marble.

"We always give a gentleman at least one chance to back his convictions; if his luck is better than mine it will hardly bankrupt the house."

Wayne gave a quick look at the man who had been thus favored.

For favor it was, even though the bank had the best of the odds. As a rule, the fair dealer never allowed direct address when the game was on.

The lookout pushed over three hundred without demur, or apparent surprise, while Mr. Smith, with a light laugh, placed a pearl-handled derringer by the side of the pile.

"It will go for that, I suppose?" he asked, with the air of one who did not imagine the proposal would be questioned.

"It goes for whatever you choose to call it. All set?"

She shut off further chance for conversation with the sharp question, and a moment later was slowly drawing the turn.

A chip which Clymer had on the ace was swept away; and he immediately played the same card to win, and doubled the stake.

Smith looked from the player to the dealer and back again. Mentally he smiled, but outwardly he gave no sign, though it seemed to him he had caught on to the true inwardness of various things.

He leaned back in his chair and watched two more cards come from the box. Then, along came his own time—and it was to win.

"Queen gives you both your bets; after this, play a straight game, and don't forget that fifty and two are the limits."

"Correct, your majesty. I knew the little lady wouldn't go back on her ardent admirer; and to-night I needed her good graces. Goldbug interviewed me out on the trail, and what he left I gave him a note of hand, payable on demand. It wasn't much of a starter, either. I'll just drop the twelve on the queen again, and see what luck is left to me."

A game begun after this fashion might have been expected to have an exciting ending, but it did not. The luck chopped around, first one winning and then the other; and Mr. Smith, after that first bit of good luck, seemed to neither win nor lose. By the end of the deal his chips had been reduced to the original ten; but he was still three hundred ahead on his side bet. He yawned as he watched the fair fingers weaving the cards together with matchless grace and skill, making ready for a new deal. He could not disguise from himself the fact that he was not in the mood for playing.

"Oh, jump the game and cash in if you feel like it," remarked the young lady.

"We can excuse you after the long ride

of the day. The house will get even sooner or later; or, you will win a great deal more. Take your time to it. A gentleman of your reputation can afford to quit a winner."

"Thanks for the permission, but I will hang on for another deal, if the cards don't run too rough. I want to get an idea how my luck really is running."

"All right, old man. You can't scare us worth a cent; and the longer the light of your beautiful countenance rests on us the better we will like it. Make your bets, gentlemen."

She held up the box so they could all see the top card, nodding as three or four of the gamblers put down their stakes on the cards of their selections.

Wayne listened to the talk with a clouded face, and threw down the limit with an impatient twist of the wrist, yet it was not because he was impatient of the time consumed.

"I believe in my soul the monumental fool is actually jealous. She must have put on the leading strings pretty taut. Confound him, he's not the sort for this kind of work. Takes it entirely too seriously, and yet don't make it a profession. I wouldn't wonder if he had been dipping into his strong box for them a good deal deeper than he ought to. Have to watch my p's and q's."

So thought Mr. Smith, and he let several turns go by without offering to play.

After that, in a half-hearted way, he came in from time to time, his luck of keeping even seeming to follow him. It was only on the last turn that he strung his chips for a call, and watched the outcome with evident interest. Wayne Clymer had done the same thing, though on a different combination.

And Wayne Clymer won.

As he gathered up his checks the lady rose to her feet.

"That settles me. I've had enough of it for to-night, and somebody else will have to take the box if this thing is to go on. Davy can deal. I am going home."

It was nothing more than she had done often enough before, and to the greater part of the players the sudden close of the game had no particular meaning. Clymer made a movement as though he, too, would push back his chair.

He was a little too late if he expected to move away with the dealer. She had already passed around the table, and held out her hand to the young stranger.

Smith shook it heartily, and they walked away together.

Clymer gazed after the pair in angry amazement, though no one said anything. Up to the present time the fair dealer had been a mystery to most of the people of Running Gear, and never before had she allowed one of the players to be her escort from the table.

She knew what some of her friends were thinking just as well as though they had spoken, and shrugged her round, shapely shoulders.

"Makes me smile, old man, when I imagine what they are thinking. And poor Clymer is just broken all up. Don't be too everlastingly polite, but just give me your arm—if you have the courage of your convictions—and escort me home. We'll do our talking after we get there. I suppose you have something to say."

"If I am to equal my reputation I generally do have. Only, I hope the aforesaid home is not too far off."

"Just a step or two. Restrain your curiosity. We will be there in a moment. Molly is no doubt waiting for me."

"Molly! Is that the young lady from the Bald Eagle?"

"I suppose it is. She is one of those straightlaced young saints who believe in hard work and mighty little play. Here we are."

It was a very comfortable little cottage in front of which they stopped, and the lady produced a pass key, by means of which they entered the house, which they found dark and deserted.

The faro queen did not seem annoyed.

She lit a lamp on the table, and then looked searchingly at Mr. Smith, who, meantime, gazed around the room with scarcely concealed interest.

It was well and even daintily furnished, with fine carpets, fresh and shining furniture, and on a broad mantle stood a picture of the divinity of the place.

This much Mr. Smith took in, but his hostess did not allow him much time to examine his surroundings. Her hand was in her bosom, and, drawing herself to her full height, she looked him in the face and slowly said:

"Now, old man, you have hunted me down; what do you want? Speak low and speak the truth. I tell you frankly I have a big desire to shoot on sight."

CHAPTER XI.

A SINGULAR AFFAIR.

"Frankness goes between us. I won't call particular attention to the fact that you have given yourself away; because, just at this juncture, it makes no particular difference. I give you my word, not professionally, but as a gentleman, that I never was more surprised in my life than when I met you in the saloon, and at such an occupation. I was not looking for you at all. I assure you I will not make capital out of my discovery."

"That is straight goods, is it, old man?"

"Straight and a yard wide. I came here for an entirely different bit of business—to find a missing man. Incidentally, I might take a clip at the party who caused his disappearance; but as yet I have not the ghost of an idea who that party is."

"A case of murder, was it? Running Gear can offer you a dozen, all equally mysterious."

"I can't even say yet that the person is dead."

"If no secret, who is it? I may be better able than you think to give you a clue."

The frank statement of the detective had apparently put the young lady at her ease. She lit a cigar as she spoke, and pushed the case over toward Smith, adding the remark:

"Perhaps you will find them rather mild for your use, but I can guarantee them to be first class."

"Don't object to that," he answered, lighting one of the weeds.

"And I don't mind telling you all about it. A party sent for me to come down and hunt up his partner, whom he suspected had received foul play, under circumstances which he did not care to put on paper; but which he would detail on my arrival."

"Which he has given you by this time, of course?"

"He has done nothing of the kind, but concluded to ignore the whole business; and, I suspect, get away with whatever that said partner left behind. I think he underrates the abilities of Philadelphia E. T. E. Smith."

"Otherwise, and in some sections, Cyclone Pete, the Silk Hat Detective."

"I see you have the matter down fine. I have been known by the more euphonious title, I admit."

"And under which are you going to sail at Running Gear?"

"I might ask almost the same question. We both of us kept our superior knowledge to ourselves. In the latter stages of the journey I have scattered the name of Smith around pretty lively, though I had no idea that it would be recognized. I think my quondam employer and yourself are the only persons who suspect, and you will both doubtless keep your own counsel."

"And that employer?"

"With you it need be no mystery. A man by the name of Clump, who has a mine they call the Cripple's Friend."

"Great Scott! What was the man's object in bringing you here? All the world knows he never had a partner."

"You are sure of that?"

"Oh, when it comes to that, one is never sure of anything but a flush royal and your shooters out. But if there was ever anybody with him in that hole he calls the Cripple's Friend, Running Gear didn't know of it."

"Then the people here didn't keep their eyes open, is all I have to say. Of course, he might have been a mighty, silent one, but he was there all the same; and was worth looking after. Tell me, now; did you ever hear of a young man by the name of Archie Carter?"

"Not in Running Gear; and I won't be sure that I did at Paradise Flat."

The lady spoke slowly, and her eyes had a far-away look, as though she was struggling with some memory of the dim past.

"What name did you carry there, by the way; and how are you known here?"

Smith braced himself up slightly, as though it required an effort to ask the question; but the lady took no offense, and responded promptly:

"When I left the stage in the East I dropped the old pseudonym and became Miss Tamar Templeton. I have never found it advisable to make another change. In fact, the name is part of my assets, and commands a respect that an unknown one would have a fight to obtain. You understand, I am one of the fighting kind."

"Yes, yes. I am indubitably aware."

The detective returned again to his drawl, and the lady who called herself Tamar Templeton noted that he passed his hand over his eyes.

"Understand me. If I am right in my suspicions, the party was a young man, who turned up there occasionally, and was known as a square young sport, with a name that was not Archie Carter, by a good deal. There were a few who suspected that he was something more than he seemed, and that he came there to have his fling, or stopped off for a time on his way to some place where he had substantial interests. Running Gear may have been that place—but it hardly seems possible Wesley Clump could have been his partner."

There was nothing in Miss Templeton's tone which went to show she was not in earnest in trying to aid the questioner, yet from under her long, drooping lashes she was studying him with closer attention than even he could have dreamed of.

As he puffed leisurely at the cigar the whole expression of the man seemed to change.

He was no longer bright, active, alert, self-confident. He lounged back in his seat, and from time to time his eyes closed.

"Thanks, awfully," he murmured.

"I begin to believe you can put me on his track, after all. I think I one day did you a service that you would be willing to requite."

"When I am sure you are not taking up the old matter where you laid it down. You knew then I was an innocent woman in the eye of the law—have you changed so that money could hire you to strike the guiltless?"

"No, no! I swear it, no! But—"

He ceased speaking and closed his eyes. His head dropped naturally back. If an outsider had been watching him he could have sworn the detective had succumbed to the effects of the journey of the day and the excitements of the evening, and had gone to sleep in the midst of a sentence.

Miss Templeton hardly thought so, from the strange smile which came around her lips, and with something like a sigh of relief she dropped back in her pocket the derringer she had been holding from the time she first noted the fight the detective was making against the drowsiness coming over him.

She said nothing, and for a minute or two made no motion, sitting there with her eyes resting on the man, whose closed eyelids told that he slept.

Then, she glanced around with instinctive caution, and glided across the floor to his side. If that sleep was as deep as it seemed, the man was actually at her mercy.

"It looks as though I had graduated from a sport to a pickpocket, and it is confoundedly ungenteel, but I suppose it will have to be done," she mused. "Unless he is a good deal more on his guard than is likely he will be apt to have some sort of a commission on his person, and what it is like I must see."

With swift and skillful hands she explored his pockets, and drew out their contents.

Had she been after wealth, the proceeds might have been considered in a measure satisfactory. The three hundred dollars won from the bank was all there, and so was a great portion of the hundred dollars borrowed from Captain Goldbug.

All this, however, she slipped gently back. It was the letters she found in his inside breast pocket which were of interest to her, and these she examined with care.

There was the envelope directed by Wesley Clump, but its inclosure was missing. Miss Tamar had not received the inside history in regard to that, and was perplexed and angry; but she continued her researches. Several letters were glanced at before she came to one which seemed to merit serious attention.

"Ah," she said; "this begins to look something like it."

"So far as the matter at Running Gear goes, you are left to your own devices. It seems to be a complicated affair, in which you will not be likely to reap much of either money or glory, unless you can earn the reward, which is problematic, unless you enlist sufficient outside assistance to eat considerable of a hole in its bigness. I understand there is another man on the ground, and would advise you to look out for him. He will be apt to work solely for his own interests. Verb. sap."

CHAPTER XII.

THE BUZZ OF THE HORNETS.

Mr. Smith came out of his trance-like slumber with a start, and stared across at the little clock on the opposite wall.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed; "I must have been asleep."

Miss Templeton was seated on the opposite side of the table, reading.

She glanced up with a smile.

"It looked that way. As I was not specially trying to use my fascinations, but was simply discussing a matter of dry business, I do not know that I feel particularly hurt, under the circumstances. Don't it strike you we had better adjourn this meeting till you are more in the vein?"

If she had adopted any other line, Mr. Smith might have suspected. There was a bad taste in his mouth, and his head felt like a barrel.

Yet, what was there to suspect? He had no compromising documents, or papers of any value, on his person, his little roll of wealth seemed as large as ever, and here he was, in the full enjoyment of his strength and freedom. He simply felt in a confused way that apologies were due his hostess, and he made them somewhat awkwardly.

"All right, old man. You understand that, though I have been a variety actress who was once unjustly accused of a crime, and just now am dealing faro for a percentage, at Davy's Dream, yet I am straight goods. If I seem a little nervous at suddenly meeting a distinguished detective, remember, I was discharged on my own recognizance, and there is always a danger that some blundering fool will one day rake up the old charge, and make it a great deal worse for me, now that my witnesses are dead and scattered. If I can help you in any way in the case you are on, so far as finding the missing man goes, I will be glad to do it."

"Thanks. If you can remember a lit-

tle more about the man who visited Paradise Flat I shall be much obliged."

"All right. I'll try and brush up my memory. But I don't promise to assist in knotting a hemp necktie for anybody. I am not that kind."

"I understand; and if I thought it was that sort of a case I would not ask for your help. I believe I will take your advice about going home. Good-night."

He bowed himself away from the door, to which Miss Tamar escorted him, and turned his face in the direction of the Bald Eagle.

He found, as he moved along through the night, that his head grew clearer, and the mists he had thought came from want of sleep were fleeing away.

"So much for getting into company one is not particularly yearning for. Very fascinating lady to some, no doubt; but not exactly my style. Wayne Clymer, though, would have given his head to have been installed where I was, unless I am away off. Am afraid he won't be any too ready to help me if he is aware of the length of my call."

Was it intuition which brought up the image of the young banker, causing his reflections to end in a laugh?

At that moment he heard a step, just at his side, and a hand touched him on the shoulder.

When he looked around he found himself face to face with the subject of his thoughts.

"I noticed you claimed old acquaintance with Miss Templeton this evening." Clymer spoke abruptly.

His manner was not very cordial, to say the least of it, and Smith saw that it would not be apt to improve as the conversation progressed.

At the same time, in personal matters the latter could be as independent as any one, and he did not intend to shirk an interview, even with a jealous admirer of the young lady of the silver box.

He answered carelessly:

"Miss Templeton and I have met before."

"So she seemed to admit. Understand me, I do not pretend to dictate as to who the lady shall include among her friends, but her friends here will join with me in seeing that she is not compromised by the attentions of persons who are strangers to the camp."

"Quite right, quite right. You can count me in on the same platform. Miss Templeton is a young lady for whom I have a great deal of respect, notwithstanding her present employment, which naturally brings her more or less in contact with the odds and ends of the earth. I assure you, my call was simply that of a former acquaintance, with whom she wanted to talk over old times."

"Miss Templeton is accustomed to taking good care of herself, and keeping that same lot of odds and ends at a distance. This evening she has made an exception of you, and, while we all have every confidence in her, we prefer she should continue to preserve the proprieties. It would be advisable hereafter to make your calls by daylight."

"Excuse me, sir. In such matters I am not accustomed to dictation; and I would allow no one to give such advice to the young lady, I assure you. I will call when the humor takes me, and Miss Tamar is willing to receive me. For your own good—and hers—there had better be no more of this nonsense."

"You will find it, perhaps, very serious nonsense. This conversation, so far as I am concerned, is intended to be confidential. I would not advise that it be repeated, in fact. Therefore, I tell you, I must insist that there shall be no repetition of this night's performance."

"Otherwise?"

"You settle with me."

"How would it be if we settled the matter now, and attend to the performance, as you call it, afterward. It may as well be decided at once whether I am a chump, or you a blamed fool."

If Wayne Clymer had deferred his mis-

sion until morning, in all probability he would have found the nerves of Mr. Philadelphia Smith in an entirely different condition; and might have hurled good advice at him by the cord.

Just now, though he did not know it, the detective had not altogether recovered from the effect of that cigar from Miss Templeton's case, and he was ready to fight at the drop of the hat.

He eyed his man keenly as he spoke, and was ready for an instant attack, in whatever shape it might come.

"That suits me to a charm," was the answer; and Smith could detect a current of satisfaction running through it.

"It is hard to say who is the challenged party, but I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt; and the choice of weapons along with it. Over yonder is a very pretty place for a scrimmage with nature's weapons; or, the night is bright enough for fair pistol practice. Unfortunately, I have not an assortment of knives along, but they, and seconds, can be obtained without much delay, if your taste is inclined in that direction."

"Thanks for your courtesy, but it is nothing to me. I have a very good revolver; or, on my own heels my fists can guard my head. We will adjourn to the arena, and have it out in any way you may prefer."

The two turned sharply aside, and walked together to the level ground at which Clymer had pointed, neither saying a word.

There, Clymer deliberately drew off his coat, and, folding it with care, laid it down, placing his revolver on it.

Smith followed suit. It seemed it was to be a fight with bare hands, after all, which suited him well enough.

On stripping, Clymer looked to be much the larger man; but about the other there was not an ounce of waste material. Though thoroughly cool and confident, he placed his high hat along with his other belongings, and bound a handkerchief around his forehead.

"We'll hardly shake hands; ready?" and at the word, four clenched fists went up, and the two stepped within distance.

It was just then that the detective thought what a foolish thing he was doing. Only a few hours in the town, and here he was, about to engage in a rough and tumble with one of its prominent citizens, for no earthly reason but because he had not taken time to allay a little unreasoning jealousy.

He had not the slightest doubt but what he could get away with his antagonist without serious damage to himself; but what was going to come afterward?

Fortunately for him, he had by chance obtained the advantage in position, and the moonlight lit up the opposing face. Without any preliminaries, Clymer struck out.

Smith dodged; and knew at once his opponent was no novice in the art of pugilism, and that if he wanted to come off victor he had a fair job of work cut out for him.

He was more than ever certain of it when his return blow was neatly parried.

And almost at that very instant he heard a chorus of voices rising on the night air, and a gang of men, that seemed to number a dozen at the least, came surging toward them.

The shout put him on his guard, and with a backward, catlike spring Smith leaped out of distance.

"Fair play, my jewel, or down goes some meeting houses!" he exclaimed; and then the crowd was upon them.

The first man was Buck Barber.

"Got him at last!" he howled, with a promptness which made Smith suspect he had been followed at a distance from Miss Templeton's rooms.

"All tergether, pards. Down him."

And with another yell the whole outfit threw themselves upon the detective.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CYCLONE BREAKS.

"That's your idea of fair play, is it?" gritted the man suspected with good reason of being Cyclone Pete.

His eyes blazed with wrath as they glared at Wayne Clymer. Then, without the least attention to the crowd almost upon him, he feinted low with his left, and shot out his right, straight as an arrow, and heavy as a ton.

The banker parried at both, but he was quick enough for neither. If Smith had let his left hand go it would have landed on the "mark," and undoubtedly left the receiver breathless.

The right hand reached the face like a colliding Express train.

Clymer ducked as it came, and it landed a little high up to be most effective, but it sprawled him right out on the broad of his back, though the top of his head seemed to hit the ground first.

Almost at the same instant—"biff! biff!"—a couple of blows landed on the detective, causing him to stagger slightly, though they did no great damage. After that came a rather mixed time.

Half a dozen other blows were struck, but over-anxiety caused the givers to interfere with each other, and as three or four were at the same time grasping at the one man who was just shaking himself together, it was no wonder they got in each other's way.

Evidently Buck Barber had digested the information received from his partner, Tim McGonnigan, and had raised an army to get even with the sport-detective after a fashion that would be thorough and without fail.

Pete mentally thought, in the first surprise, that Clymer was behind it, and acted accordingly. He had no space to reconsider his belief; and it is more than likely any ordinary man would have been knocked out in the short space he was taking, to recover from the force of his own blow and turn his attention to his assailants.

He struck once or twice, to be sure, short, chopping, half-arm hits, that cut where they fell, but three or four men were inside of his guard, and it looked as though he must go down.

He seemed to go down, in fact, but it was a dodge of his, and the next instant he was rising in the rear of the men who had been behind him, and was throwing out his fists with the driving power of a steam engine.

Three times he struck, landing his blows just where they would do the most good, and straightening out three men "cold as a wedge."

As he was swinging his shoulder forward to reach a fourth, Buck Barber sprang upon him, wrapping a pair of long arms around his waist with a clutch nothing could shake off, at the same time pressing his face close against the body of the detective.

"Blame ye all, take ett cool!" he shouted, in half-smothered accents.

"Ketch hold and lay him out. We'll take his hide off with a gad, an' ride him out of town on a mule."

Three or four of the cooler ones recognized the wisdom of the order and seized their prisoner from behind, though the absence of his coat gave Smith an advantage in the game he had not thought of when his top clothing was discarded.

"We got him!" they gritted; and Buck, suddenly releasing his own hold, sprang back, shouting:

"Then, down him!"

For a trifle the detective had been quiescent, husbanding his strength. When Barber darted away he once more unchained himself.

Fettered by stout arms though he was, he reached more than one unwary man with a blow that dashed him to the earth, and then, doubling around with all the fierce suppleness of a cornered wildcat, he was making the fight of his life.

The advantages were all against him, but he would never cease trying to make his teeth meet. It looked as though he

was at his last gasp, for he was in clutches he could not shake off, and had received more than one heavy blow.

Suddenly, the men at his back did release their grips—and went down like logs. Smith staggered out of the press, and looked on in bewilderment, as he saw one man charging through the mob, his arms going like piston-rods.

"Syksey, take de butt!" he gurgled in astonishment, and then, bracing himself, went into the mob again, on his own account.

He might have spared himself the exertion.

There were half a dozen men who, first and last, had been knocked down; and about this time they decided they had enough. Buck Barber, moreover, appeared to recognize the fresh hand at the bellows, and gave a signal to quit.

Without delay the mob suddenly melted away.

"You're not a bad kind to tie to, after all," said Silk Hat Pete, as he folded his arms, content to build a bridge for his flying enemy.

Wayne Clymer did not accept victory quite as stolidly.

He leaped to his clothing and picked up the revolver he had discarded with the rest. As he cocked and raised it he looked as though about to shoot, but, his finger did not tighten on the trigger. He knew the gang better than his late antagonist, and was expecting to see them turn and open fire.

"Yes, and if you had not hit quite so hard I would have been sooner in the game. If you are satisfied, I think this court of honor will adjourn. It's remarkable how a little shoulder hitting takes the infernal foolishness out of a man."

"Put it there, pard. I admit I was a fool myself. A few words of explanation and apology would have set things all straight in the first place. But then, it would have spoiled a heap of fun. I'll go to bed now."

"So will I," laughed the other, frankly accepting the offered hand.

"I don't want you to think I am always as cross as a bear with a sore head; but things have gone wrong all around, of late, and I had to blow off steam somehow. I confess I feel like a different man."

"And so do several of our friends down the road."

The two donned their coats and walked amicably together to the Bald Eagle. By common consent neither alluded again to Miss Templeton, and they parted in a fairly friendly manner.

"All the same," thought Smith, as he rolled into bed, "he would be more than mortal man if he didn't have it in for me after that knockdown. I suppose I shall have to look a little out. And, I swear, I don't mean to forget my feminine friend of the stage. They say no news is good news; but I fancy, if there is nothing fresh in the morning, I shall have to drop all other holds and devote myself to that."

When morning came there was no more news, or, at least, nothing which could definitely go under that name.

Later on in the day there came a sensation.

With the dawn other parties had gone out to investigate, but no fresh traces had been found; and, in fact, there seemed nothing to show positively in which direction the missing young lady had gone. There was a good deal of impatience to hear a report from the cowboys who had taken the trail of the abductors.

There was no one in town who had not listened three or four times over to a description of Miss Carter; and an opinion had been generally formed that the abductors knew more about her than did Running Gear. Her every appearance had indicated a fair share in this world's goods, and it seemed more than likely she had been carried off, and would be held, for the sake of ransom.

When Left Hand Billy came galloping

in, without his companions, his appearance created a commotion.

As he headed for the Bald Eagle, the drift of the community was immediately in that direction also.

"What's ther news? What's ther news?" yelled half a dozen or more voices as he rolled somewhat wearily off his horse.

"Blamed ef I know, fur sure; but it looks like we'd bin havin' a cussed lot o' work fur a cussed leetle lot ov fun. Hyer's a letter fur Potter thet will tell how ther land seems ter lie."

"A letter! Where did you get it? Who from?"

While three or four officious messengers were scampering off to call Pembroke Potter, the rest crowded around the cowboy boss.

"That's ther myst'ry ov it."

"We crowded along purty much all night, sure we's on ther right trail, but gittin' no sight ov huff ner hair; and then ther trail slumped. Couldn't ketch no ghost ov a sign. An' then when we rode by a place we'd passed more ner once afore, we seen a leetle pile ov stones, and stickin out ov 'em a bit of paper."

"An' that's ther way we found ther letter fur Pem Potter."

"But what was in it?" yelled the curious ones.

"It's Pem's put next. He'll tell yer. In course we don't know."

There was a huge laugh at the idea of such delicacy on the part of the cowboy and his men. Before it had time to subside Potter came forward.

He hastily ran his eye over the writing, and then read aloud as follows:

Mr. Potter:

Dear Sir:—I am afraid I have put you and others to a good deal of trouble; but I assure you, it was not my fault. I suppose I came very near to being murdered, and I was certainly carried away. I am now, however, in the hands of persons who are acting as my friends, and will be restored to society at no very late date. Any time spent in searching for me will only be thrown away, as I am in no danger, and at perfect liberty to return as soon as I find it convenient.

Respectfully,

CARMEN CARTER.

CHAPTER XIV.

VANISHING FOOTPRINTS.

Of course, Mr. Smith heard the news along with the rest.

He had already been around town, in a quiet way, looking up points. As he was a stranger to the immediate neighborhood—though he had several times explored the country the other side of the mountain—he did not think it worth while to start out on a hunt for the missing young lady until he had found something like a clue to go on.

What he was waiting for was the time when some sort of proposition would be made to effect the ransom of the young lady, and communication should be opened up with the party, which held her.

For he had about come to the conclusion of those who believed she had been spirited away for that purpose.

A discovery made by Pembroke Potter went a good ways to confirm him in that belief.

Miss Carter's trunk, it seemed, had not been taken to her room, but was safely ensconced in the little room behind the office, where such things were sometimes temporarily put.

The reason for that was the trunk was too large or the stairway too narrow, and after a bit of measurement Jack Potts had shaken his head, ordered it in there, and explained the situation to Carmen.

This trunk, Potter, in the presence of several satisfactory witnesses, had taken the liberty of examining, in the hope that something would be found out about the young lady, and the location of her friends.

Thus it was discovered that, though

she may have had a respectably filled purse to offer to the road-agents, in the trunk was a wallet containing quite a sum of money.

It was natural enough to think if the outlaws had made her a captive, she would want to utilize this money; though why they had spared her purse when it was at their mercy was a puzzle.

There was one thing in the trunk which interested the detective, although no one else seemed to take any account of it.

It was a specimen of the handwriting of the young lady.

Though it was only a page, in regard to a matter which no one at Running Gear could or cared to understand, Smith studied it quite attentively. After Potter had read the note received in such a mysterious way, he looked carefully at that also.

Being something of an expert in regard to handwriting, he was able to decide as to two things.

Though written with a lead pencil, the letter found by Left Hand Billy was beyond question written by the young lady.

More than that, there was no evidence it was written under duress of any kind. It was a point a little difficult to solve, yet the detective was sure in his own mind that, however she might be deceived, Miss Carmen was assured that she was writing the very truth.

"Something very queer about it," he mused; "yet the whole journey has its queer features. Archie Carter seems to have an existence, but is a mighty hard gentleman to get any information about. Potts has given me the only pointer that has much bearing on the whisking away of the young lady, and Potts himself is not certain whether he is telling the truth. I wonder if the brother, the shadow which Jack saw, or thinks he saw, and the abduction can all be connected. If so, find out one point and you touch the rest. I think I'll interview Mr. Clymer in regard to the matter he spoke of last night."

Accordingly, he went over to the bank.

As they had parted reasonably, good friends, he did not believe there would be any friction between them, and he was not disappointed. He was met courteously, and invited into the sanctum in the rear of the main room.

It was here that confidential business was generally done; and the banker was ready for a little of it now.

"I suppose you have called in regard to that matter we spoke of last night—a check or draft which I thought had passed through our hands?"

"That is it. Have you found it?"

It was not worth while to waste time in preliminaries.

"I have found out all about it. The paper itself is not here, but has been forwarded back in the regular order of business to the bank in San Francisco by which it was drawn."

"And the date it was cashed?"

"Just two weeks ago to-day. It was presented by Mr. Carter himself, who was identified by a person known to the bank, but who is not here now. Harper had charge of the business, as I was away, and did not meet the young man at all, but I can give you a pretty close description of him."

Smith listened attentively to the description which followed, and could not but admit it was sharply drawn.

"Harper says he came here expecting to meet some one, according to what was said, and that he intended to be here soon again. Of course, that was only said incidentally. If we believe a person is all right we ask for no particulars; while, if we have any suspicions at all, we simply do not deal with him."

"Did he let drop anything which might indicate where he hailed from?"

"That is a point on which Harper was uncertain; but he thinks the town of Paradise Flat was mentioned. At any rate, I have written a letter addressed to him there, mentioning the supposed oc-

currences of last night. Perhaps it would be as well for you to run your eyes over it. I may have left out something."

He drew from his desk a letter as he spoke, and tossed it over to the detective.

It proved to be well and clearly written, and the detective could think of nothing he cared to ask. Clymer went on:

"This morning I heard something about the cause of your affair with that man Barber, who led the assailing hosts. I do not pretend to advise, but I doubt the prudence of investing very much in the Cripple's Friend; while I hardly think it worth while to caution you against Buck and his blandishments."

"Scarcely," responded Smith.

"Should you care to invest—and I tell you, as my own private opinion, unless you stay with it you will hardly find it profitable to place much money—I will be happy to introduce you to the nearest approach to reliability that is to be found. I think that much is due you after last night."

"Many thanks, but I believe my enthusiasm has cooled off. I have seen the place."

Nothing further was said that would interest the reader, and when the visitor took his departure the two men seemed to be on very friendly terms.

Wayne Clymer sat drumming idly on the table for some minutes after his caller had departed. He was evidently thinking over the matter of the draft, for he referred to the entries in regard to it, and there was a queer smile on his face. He was just rising to go out when there was another caller—two of them, in fact.

Buck Barber came stalking in, and with him Tim McGonnigan. The former opened business at once.

"Dunno ez I orter hev called, but 'pears it won't do no hurt ef I make myself squar' with you. Ef I hed knowed you war takin' up fur him we wouldn't a chipped. When you began ter git in yer work we jest skipped. All ther same, it 'pears ter me thar ain't likely ter be much luv lost betwixt you two."

"What are you driving at?" asked Clymer, sharply.

"Jest this. I'm down on him, hard, an' I've swore ter git even. An' yit, I don't keer ter hev no fallin' out with Wayne Clymer. See?"

"No, I do not see."

"You took a hand in las' night when we hed him whar we wanted him. What I'm axin' are, be yer gon' ter do it ag'in?"

The way the question came it was almost an insult; and Wayne Clymer was a man quick to resent. The eyes of Buck were watching him keenly, but without showing a spark of fear. His words almost might be construed as a challenge as well.

The banker did not allow himself to fly off the handle.

"Under like circumstances, I should certainly interfere again; only, I would begin by shooting. Friend or foe, I have always stayed with my company till the cows' tails dropped off. On the other hand, I am not going out of my way to protect or avenge a stranger. That's not business, and it's not what we are here for."

"That's what I wanted ter know. You're kinder runnin' one end ov ther town, and ef you war goin' ter steer it ag'in me I'd know what I'd hev ter be doin'. All I wanted war a fair show."

"You'll get that on a fair deal; but if you kill your man with a crowd, I wouldn't be surprised if the vigilantes killed you. I shouldn't try to stop them. Running Gear is going to look after the decencies, especially in regard to gentlemen who come here with capital to invest."

"All right; but mebbe it'll be w'uss fur you ef you start that same risin' ov ther vigilantes. You sabbe that? So long."

Clymer's hand dropped to his waist, but it did not rise again.

Instead, he pointed to the door with his other hand.

"I don't think your present game is to rob the bank, but I'm not taking any chances. Hands up!"

At the sharp order Barber's hands went over his head. While utterly innocent of any such intention at that moment, if he was shot down he recognized the fact that appearances would be against him, when supplemented by a statement of the banker. He and his pard were heavily armed, and just outside were two horses hitched, which they had ridden there.

"Be aisy," mildly muttered McGonigan; and easy it was.

"Yer got ther age on this hand, Clymer, an' I pass out. When I chip ag'in it'll be with a full hand. So long."

He and his backer stalked out, leaving the banker smiling, yet not altogether at ease as to the real cause of the visit.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LURKERS NEAR THE BANK.

Jack Potts had not felt at all hurt by the desertion of the previous evening.

The gentleman who could plant himself so suddenly in the good graces of the hitherto unapproachable Miss Templeton was rather to be admired.

Anyhow, Smith made it all right with him in the morning; and after dinner, when the detective came up to him as he was lounging on the porch, he was all ready for conversation.

There was one subject, of course, to which it was natural the conversation would drift, and they reached that without much delay.

"By the way, don't it look funny that if the lady's brother was in town two weeks ago, as it seems likely he was, no one knows or remembers anything about him? Confound it, who was around town that day with Kane Curtis? Putting two and two together, it is a sure thing some one must have seen them."

"Kane Curtis? Thunder! Did he have him in tow? Kane went east a week ago."

"That's the way I figure it out. I'm getting interested in this thing, and haven't exactly a wooden head. The two went into the bank together that day. There is no one else it could have been who introduced the stranger. I have a description of the young man all right enough, but no one saw him come out. No one knows what he did afterward. Blame it! If some one would just say which way his face was turned, and if Curtis was with him, he could be followed up."

"What do you want to follow him up for?"

"Find where he went to, of course. There is a chance he's been murdered, don't you see—which would be good enough reason why he was not on hand to meet the young lady."

"Something in that."

"Then, again, he may have dropped his money somewhere around Running Gear, and the parties don't want his sister looking the matter up."

"Wait a minute. Hold on. Blame me if I don't half believe I saw Kent come away from the bank just that very day; but I'll never tell you who was with him. Strikes me, though, it was Clymer himself."

"Scarcely. Clymer was away."

"Ye'r right—and I hadn't thought of it. What sort of a looking young man is this Carter?"

Smith reproduced the description the banker had given him, and Jack listened to it attentively.

"That's the man for a dollar—and I never noticed him. Just saw him go by and thought no more of it. 'Pears to me they went along toward the Daybreak."

"Say, Clump seems to have been trying to unload his Cripple's Friend; do you think there is any chance that he put a bit of it on him?"

"Not if Kane Curtis could help it. He

and old man Clump never could pull together. Besides, we haven't seen any sudden rise to affluence on the part of the wooden leg. He gets drunk just about so often; but if he had the means he would be drunk all the time. No. Pegleg is running along in the same old rut. He makes a sort of living, and that's about as good as the rest of us."

Nevertheless, this was a sort of clue. As he did not care to explore at the Daybreak himself, Smith thought it would be wise to have some one else look the matter up; and cautiously felt the way with Jack.

Potts was nothing loth, though it had to be done by proxy.

"And, by the way, Clymer didn't seem altogether happy because I had a talk with Miss Templeton over old times? Is there anything between them?"

"Take a better man than I to make an affidavit about the young lady, but for a private opinion. I'd observe that he's badly mashed on her. Has been ever since she made her appearance at the Dream, some months ago. Perhaps she wouldn't have had just such a comfortable time if the boys hadn't known that she had him behind her whenever she chose to crook her finger."

"She's handsome enough to make almost any man forget his mother; but all the same, it looks like a queer sort of a pair. Those kinds of banks don't generally chip in together."

"For a flyer, I'd say that was about the way Miss Tamar looks at it. But you can't most always tell what is going to happen when you get a sporty young man and a dashing young woman together in the same corral. I believe if she says the word she'll be Mrs. Wayne Clymer. And about that time he'll jump the game here and move further East. Such perfections would be thrown away on Running Gear society."

Johnny spoke just a little bitterly, and the detective thought that at one time he might have been a trifle hard hit himself.

In that case it would not be good to prolong the talk in that direction. After some side nonsense the gentleman with the silk hat took himself off. He was still at sea in regard to a good many preliminary points which he would like to be informed about before getting down to work, yet it did not seem to him the day had been altogether without progress.

Sooner or later he was going to find out what interest, if any, Archie Carter had in the Cripple's Friend, and what was the mystery of his disappearance.

Meantime, as so far as he knew, it was to be a labor of love, and he could afford to take his time, even though he had not altogether satisfied himself in regard to Miss Carmen.

Evening came down at last, and he needed no one to tell him in regard to the ropes. He burnished up his head-gear, brushed off his clothing, and went out with the air of one proposing to conquer.

Of course, it was no more than natural he should turn his steps toward Davy's Dream.

In going thither he had to pass the bank, and he saw there was a light there. Mr. Clymer or his assistant was probably going over the books.

There was nothing strange in that; but what excited the attention of the detective was an indistinct view of a human figure, just under the window.

Without halting, or making any sign of discovery, he kept an eye on the spot, and presently saw the figure move away.

His first thought was that if he had been a little sooner he would have seen the individual peering in. His next, the story which Potts had told him, about the shadow he had seen through the window, just before the abduction of Carmen Carter.

He put the two together at once, and when he came to where he was lost in the shadow of a convenient building he

turned, and made his way back, intending to get a closer view of the party.

The flank movement was well and carefully executed.

It seemed certain that he would obtain a position where from no great distance he could watch subsequent proceedings, and no doubt it would have been a success had it not been for an unexpected development.

Of course, he was stepping with the lightest of footfalls, and was not liable to make any sound which would give an alarm.

Consequently, when a person appeared in front of him, moving with a caution as great as his own, it was natural to suppose this person was bent upon the same business.

The strangest thing was that this person was a woman; and that woman was Miss Tamar Templeton, of the Dream.

"A story behind all this, or I am a sinner," thought the detective, and he redoubled his vigilance, because he had two persons to watch.

Fortunately, he was not put to any great trouble. Miss Templeton approached the man noiselessly, but fearlessly, and at no great distance stood gazing at him with folded arms.

He was so much interested in his task of viewing the inside of the bank that he seemed careless of the danger of being seen by some one on the outside. Now and then, he shook his fist; once or twice his hand fell to his waist. More and more it looked as though he was there for evil, and the detective laid his hand on his own weapon, even though he did not intend to use it except in some sudden emergency.

Finally, that emergency seemed to come, for he thought he detected the symptoms of final decision in the movements of the skulker, and when his hand sought his waist and then rose toward the window, the detective was about to spring forward when he saw that he was forestalled.

Tamar Templeton glided to the side of the man and fearlessly placed her hand on his shoulder.

The start given was one of genuine surprise, but there was not a word uttered. The stranger gave one glance, and then followed, without a word being spoken on either side.

"Great Scott! The two seem to be working together," thought the detective.

"I must see the end of this. It won't last very long, for she ought to be due at the Dream by this time."

The two kept away from the street, and as the city was for the most part of the single-rank formation, it was not likely any one would be met. It happened, also, that it was not difficult for the detective to keep well in the shadow, and yet hold them in sight. Before going very far the two stopped and faced each other.

Smith halted also, and found that, though his ears were particularly sharp, he could not hear a word, and it would be dangerous to attempt to get closer. All he could do was to watch.

From the gestures used, he could see they were having an animated conversation, and he wondered at the self-control which could keep both of them from raising their voices.

Finally, Miss Templeton reached out her hand, and the other placed in it something which looked like a letter, and then suddenly turned and darted away.

The lady looked after the fugitive, but did not attempt to call him back. When he had passed out of view she began to retrace her steps, looking thoughtfully downward as she went.

By that time Smith was hugging the ground, and trusting to the shadows to keep out of sight.

He did not care to be caught spying.

As she went by he saw the letter was still in her hand, and reached a sudden determination. He laid aside his hat, and drew from his pocket a cap which he had not yet worn in Running

Gear. With this on his head, and his coat turned, he was in an instant in semi-disguise.

Then, he darted silently up, snatched the paper from between the fingers of the lady, as yet unconscious of his presence, and was away like a flash.

CHAPTER XVI.

CARMEN'S MESSAGE.

Miss Templeton always carried a revolver, and was an expert in its use. Before the detective had gone a dozen yards she had it out, and pulled trigger the instant it came in line.

An involuntary stumble saved him, and the bullet went whistling over his head.

She halted when she fired, and Smith kept on, consequently the distance rapidly increased, and another shot went wilder than ever.

At that, Miss Tamar turned and scurried away in the opposite direction. Evidently she did not care to bring assistance—nor to answer questions which might come with it.

Smith was well satisfied.

He kept his wits about him all the time, and hardly had the faro queen taken to flight when he scudded back to where he had left his hat. It was not likely the pistol shots would bring any one, but the lady herself might send somebody to investigate.

If so, the telling evidence of his presence should not be found.

Restoring his appearance as he hurried away, he got once more on the street without discovery. As he passed through a bar of light from a convenient window he glanced at the letter so strangely obtained.

Behold, it was addressed, "Mr. Archie Carter." Without a doubt it was the one mailed by Miss Carmen, when she found that her brother was not on the spot to meet her upon the arrival of the coach.

The handwriting was hers, as Smith saw at a glance.

"More of a mystery in this than ever," thought the detective. "The first thing to do is to—no. The first thing is to put the young lady off the track by showing around at the Dream. She can hardly suspect as yet, and if I can slip in before her arrival it will put me out of the line altogether."

Acting on this reflection, he made his way to the saloon, and entering quietly, mingled with the throng. A glance through the connecting doorway showed him Miss Tamar was not in her seat behind the layout.

In fact, it was just about time for the game to open out, and as she was not always prompt in her coming, no one as yet had noticed her absence.

Potter Pembroke was there, however, and as a result, when Wayne Clymer came in with a man whom Smith did not remember to have seen before, the four sat down to a table and began a game of draw, which was strictly intended to pass away the time. Incidentally, however, it might give the various parties an opportunity to judge of the strength of the average hand played by the others.

Smith was thus engaged when the faro queen entered. He saw her eyes wandered over the room, and had no doubt she marked his presence. After that he paid no attention to anything but the poker game, which went on for an hour, with varying luck, and then broke up by mutual consent. A little later he turned toward the hotel with Potter, who had announced his intention of going home. He sometimes played poker as long as the rest of them, but this was not one of his nights on.

In his own room the detective examined the letter, which ran like this:

My Dear Brother:

I have not been able to stand the suspense, and have come to see you—to be with you. As I wrote you, your identity has become known, and I verily believe you are in danger of your life. If this

reaches you come to me at once, to the Bald Eagle Hotel, and I will tell you the rest. Lovingly your sister,

CARMEN.

"Heavens! This complicates matters. Carter missing, the sister missing; and Clump, Miss Tamar Templeton, and that unknown man more or less mixed up in the affair. Could it be possible the fellow who undoubtedly gave Miss Templeton the letter was Carter himself? If so, how did he obtain the epistle; and what has he against Wayne Clymer? The thing is beginning to develop into a first-class mystery. Where does her interest come in?"

No wonder the thing was a puzzle.

If this unknown man was Archie Carter, and his life, as the letter said, was in danger, it was not strange he was keeping dark. But who was it that was trying to kill him—and why?

Could it be Clymer was the foe?

There were fifty other questions which the detective thought of, and it must be confessed he was glad to have them arise.

It gave him all the better chance to use his analytic powers, and to come to some conclusion as to the real work cut out for him to do.

It is true he had seen the stranger, and had taken in his general appearance so well that he believed he would recognize him if he saw him again under anything like similar circumstances, yet he had not obtained a view sufficiently near to be able to describe his features, or his peculiarities, and it would be hard to get on his trail unless some lucky chance was favorable.

There was a chance, even, that he was simply one of the hangers on at the Dream, who had been engaged by Tamar to procure the letter. Appearances were against that view, but in such matters it did not do to go by appearances, though they all had to be sifted.

"Somehow, it seems to me Clump has the key to the puzzle, and some way or other I'll have to rob him of it. He don't intend to see the bolt turned if he can help it," was Smith's final conclusion.

It was still reasonably early for men who were accustomed to take a swing through the Running Gear saloons; and having digested as well as he was able the contents of the note, Philadelphia Smith was not anxious to retire, and so went quietly out again.

He had hardly reached the street when he was accosted in youthful tones:

"Say, sport, fur a 'tective strikes me yer gitting inter a mighty blame tangle. Look a leetle out, er jump ther game. There's sum bad men gittin' ready ter kim down on yer mighty hard."

The speaker was the lad Tim McGonigan had discovered at Wesley Clump's cabin. Though he spoke in a low tone, it was evidently not because he viewed the man with any great reverence.

Up to this he had not been seen by Smith, and his appearance was really a surprise.

The lad had a dialect which did not belong in this region, and was more appropriate to the gamin of an eastern city.

"Thanks for your warning, but I'd like to hear how you know I am a detective. I always thought I was a thoroughbred sport, and that's what my friends call me."

"A little of both, old man, a little of both. But you're playin' 'tective here, and the boys have got you down fine."

"That is not telling how you know so much about me."

"Heard yer tell it, er as good as tell it. Wasn't I in ther loft at Chumpy's shack when you an' him hed it out?"

"Perhaps you were, though I didn't see you. What were you doing there?"

"Snoozin'. Chumpy don't set no galus table, but it's ther best I kin do. I wouldn't go back on him, I reckon, if he'd bin doin' anythin' tougher than ter give yer away; but I wantster see yer hev a chance fur yer white alley, and then be 'round ter witness ther row."

"Who has he been giving me away to?"

"Oh, that yer kin find out fur yerself. But you bet rocks his side pard you was inquiren' fur knows all about it."

"Young man, I don't believe in disinterested friendship, and I suspect you are playing for a stake. I'll make it all right for your warning; but I'll make it two or three times all right if you will put me on to who that side partner really is."

"Mebbe it's Archie Carter."

"Maybe it is, but where will I find him?"

"Rats! Wesley ain't ther softest snap fur a lad ov my inches ter take up with, an' he's mighty handy with that wod leg ov his when he's crossed in luv, er busted at draw, but I ain't givin' him away. Them things yer kin find out fur yerself. I jest wanted ter tell yer."

"You keep this, and when you want to tell some more come around. I've got more of the same sort."

He dropped a dollar in the hand of the lad, who was willing enough to receive it. At the same time Smith asked:

"What is your name?"

"Clippers are what I go by, an' it's good enough. If I ain't at Wesley's, an' yer wants ter interwoo me, enquire at ther Daybreak. That's my stompin' ground. Nightey-night!"

With that farewell the boy quickly disappeared.

If Clippers referred to Buck Barber and the gang which evidently trained behind him, then his information was not new. If it referred to some other party, afraid that he was there to interfere with them, there must be a reason for that fear.

"All I've got to do is to wait," was his thought. "I'm bait and trap both. Wonder if it could be the warning was sent by Clump. Evidently the boy does not think his patron is in danger, or he would not have told what he did. At the same time, why this mystery about Archie Carter—unless they want to protect him? Decidedly, I must find out who is his enemy, and why."

Of course, Mr. Smith had an idea when he left his room; and the interview with Clippers did not interfere with it. He knew about what time Tamar Templeton left the saloon, and he intended to meet her.

After that, he would be governed by circumstances. It might be he would even restore the letter, in case it seemed he could catch her off guard. Something might be revealed in the confusion of the moment.

Nevertheless, the hour was a trifle later than he thought, and the game at the Dream was closed early. For the last few nights the attendance at the table had been slack, and Davy and his dealer were not inclined to press the game for the benefit of the minor lights, who could only lose a few dollars, and might win a very respectable stake.

The lady swept out of the saloon unattended, and turned toward her home. In so doing she came face to face with Wayne Clymer.

The gentleman had long ago received a hint that if she accepted company one night she would have to do it another, and that consequently she preferred not to have it at all, but for once he seemed to have forgotten.

There could be no mistaking him in that light, and he dropped in by her side without a word on his part.

"It's you, is it, Clymer?? I was just puzzling my brains to think how I could get a chance to speak with you, and here you have saved me the trouble of pleading for an interview."

"You know the greatest trouble with you has been to avoid one. It is to be hoped you have experienced a change of heart."

"Please—don't! You are going to begin that same old nonsense over, and I won't have it. I wanted to ask you a question. Do you know a young man by the name of Archie Carter?"

CHAPTER XVII.

MISS TAMAR TAKES A HAND.

The question was abruptly asked, and must have been the last thing Clymer was expecting to hear.

If there was any reason why it should be discomfiting the circumstances were all right for him to shew it.

He broke into a laugh.

"Great goodness! Have you an interest in the gentleman? If I had known it I would have been asking you the same question myself. I have been looking his record up, and as far as I have gone it seems all right. Frankly, my personal acquaintance is nothing; but he had some trifling business with the bank, and this morning I was catechized in regard to it. If you can give me any information concerning the gentleman I will be a thousand times obliged; and so will a friend of mine."

"It is not a laughing matter. The person has enemies, his life is in danger from them, and they think he is in or near Running Gear."

"And you wanted me to warn him?"

"Something of that kind, if you could, although I have reason to believe he is already on his guard. I suspect that in one way or another the young man is responsible for the disappearance of the young lady at the Bald Eagle, and it is because of her that I take an interest in the affair."

"If it is no secret, how did you come to know anything about him?"

"Oh, we hear strange things in our business, and can put them together as well as the most. I wanted to ask you, if you ever have the chance, to warn him."

"I will do so," answered Clymer, gravely.

"But, can you?"

"Of that I am not so sure. I sent a letter to him to-day, addressed to Paradise Flat, on the off chance of its reaching him. I told him about the arrival and disappearance of his sister, and requested him to acknowledge receipt if it got into his hands. I can write him again. How did you come to think I could help you in the matter?"

"I do not care to go into it too much. Persons in our profession have to be very careful. But I will say, this much: I think I heard your name mentioned in the conversation, though what was said about you I have no idea. I only put one and one together."

"That was right. Glad you mentioned it. There may be more of a clue in it than you think. Suppose we drop the stranger, now, and talk about ourselves."

"Thanks, but I prefer to keep to the other subject. Would you mind telling me who was making inquiries?"

"Not a bit. It was the gentleman who came in on the coach with Miss Carter. It all came about very naturally."

"You are sure he could have nothing against the young man?"

"Not sure, of course; but reasonably certain."

"Do you know what he came here for?"

"He says, with some idea of investing in a mine; but I suspect he is more likely to prefer a deposit at the Dream. From what I have seen of him he is sport from the ground up."

"Ever hear of him before?"

"I believe I have."

"As a professional sport, and nothing else?"

"If he is the man sometimes called Silk Hat Pete and Cyclone Pete, he has a great reputation as a pasteboard twirler and all-around sport."

"Let me tell you what I believe."

"Certainly. You recognized him as an old friend, and your information should be reliable."

"Not friend, but acquaintance. At that time—some years ago—unless I am greatly mistaken, he was a detective sub rosa, who trailed his victims down for the love of it—and no doubt for fair emolument—and left the finishing touch-

es to be done by others, so that his hand should not be connected with the work."

"But that must have been years back?"

"Yes; but, listen. He made his appearance in the West three years ago. I heard of an all-night game in which one of the Denver banks was broken by a new sport, who had just come in."

"True. I believe I heard of it myself. There was an attempt to rob him on the way home, which resulted disastrously to the thieves."

"Yes. And a few weeks later Captain Hardhand, who had almost retired from the road with a competency, was ferreted out."

Clymer laughed pleasantly.

"As I have not followed the statistics of the fraternity of road-agents—and until I began dropping in at the Dream had given a faro bank a wide berth—these things have largely escaped my attention."

"Oh, I am just giving you a little history, which may not be interesting, but ought to prove instructive. He has since then been heard of at various points, creating a sensation as a sport—and just as often some evildoer of prominence had an enforced retirement from the ranks of crime. He has several times been not a hundred miles from here."

"Let it be so. What I do not understand is, what this is to me."

"It means that he is not here for his health, nor for the dollars he can pick up at the Dream—though he will take precious care of both. He is after some one; and that some one is either connected with the Carters, or with you. Perhaps both. No. Do not misunderstand me. But some one may have an eye on you or your bank, and Philadelphia Smith may have an eye on that some one. He is a safe man to trust for winning in the long run; but while he is looking around, the other may be getting in his work. I would advise you to keep your eyes open."

"Thank you once more. It is gratifying to know you are willing to put yourself to the trouble of cautioning me. The man who attempts to rob the bank, however, will find all things set and appointed for him, and most likely retire feet foremost."

"Don't be overconfident, my friend. Keep your eyes open and—good-night."

She left him abruptly, and before he could object to the departure the door of her dwelling closed behind her.

He was too proud to show his disappointment, but he turned away with his teeth tight set. She could admit a man who was certainly a sport, and possibly a sleuth hound of the law, to a long interview; but she barred him resolutely out.

Nevertheless, she had taken the trouble to give him a warning, and that fact had some slight compensating power.

If she cared for him at all, why did she so resolutely keep him at arms' length, when he had shown as well as he knew how that his intentions were strictly honorable? Truly, the fair dealer at the Dream was a greater puzzle to Wayne Clymer than to any other patron of her place of business.

He was just thinking of this when, suddenly, and without warning, he received a blow from behind which felled him to the ground.

The blow was a hard one, but it did not deprive him of his senses, though for a moment he was dazed, and unable to put up any effectual resistance.

The assailant did not wait for him to recover, but sprang upon him with the activity of a cat. Not a word did he utter, but, grasping Clymer's wrists, he forced them behind his back, and grasped them firmly with one hand, leaving the other free.

The free hand was immediately put to a very practical use. It darted from one pocket to another, finally drawing out a package of papers from the breast of Clymer's coat.

It was at that moment the banker, his

strength having somewhat returned, gave a sudden twist, which released his wrists.

With his palms and knees thrust against the ground, he then sought to spring to his feet, but the other was not to be altogether taken off guard.

With a lightning leap he landed with both knees on the back of Wayne Clymer, and jowelling him again to the ground, with his left hand at the back of his neck, with his right hand he sought to draw a weapon.

Left to himself for a moment, and the assassin would have made short work of his victim, who, from start to finish, was never given a chance to defend himself.

There was a low cry, that would have hardly reached half a dozen rods from the spot, a flutter of skirts, and then a pair of arms were thrown around the neck of the uppermost man, none the less effective in their grip because they belonged to a woman.

Their touch appeared to have a quelling effect. Without a struggle the attacking party, who had been so viciously minded but an instant before, leaped clear of his intended victim, and the encircling arms as well, and sprang away in a headlong retreat.

As he immediately turned the corner of the house he was almost instantly out of sight.

It was as well for him that he had made no delay, for had he struggled at all to effect his purpose he would have fallen into the hands of a man who was apt to act promptly and without mercy when the occasion required.

This man was none other than the Cyclone Sport, who arrived on the run, and barely too late to take a hand in.

Clymer was practically unhurt; the man was in retreat; Miss Tamar stood in the way. Mr. Smith looked the situation over and wished he had not come at all. He certainly was not going to make himself ridiculous by chasing after the fugitive; nor would he train his revolver on a fleeing man.

He put the best face he could on the matter, and spoke cheerfully:

"Hello! What's been going on here? Sorry I couldn't arrive a few seconds sooner; but I had to chase myself hard to get here when I did. What's the worst news?"

"Hard to tell. Somebody tried to go through me, but it don't look as though he was much ahead. Thanks to Miss Templeton he seems to have dropped his booty and run."

The letters and other property, extracted from the banker's pocket were on the ground, where the other had placed them, and Clymer, catching a glimpse of them, gathered them up, running them over by the dim light.

He paid little attention to the sport detective, and almost less to the lady. Something was evidently wrong with the tally.

He straightened up and looked keenly along the course taken by the runaway.

An intuition struck Mr. Smith hard, and he leaned over.

"Is this part of the spoils?" he asked, straightening up, with the letter of which he had robbed Miss Tamar in his hand.

It seemed as though he had just picked it from the ground.

"Yes. Thanks all, and good-night."

Without anything more formal or friendly, Clymer turned away.

"Confound the ungrateful wretch!" exclaimed Miss Templeton. "And I just saved his life. He looks as though he was not altogether grateful."

"Men seldom are. I think I'll keep him in sight. That party might come back at him. I'll see you again."

CHAPTER XVIII.

TIM MCGONNIGAN'S TRAIL.

"Tim, yer an honest man ter tie to, but yer ain't ther most cheerful pard onless yer hez got biz on hands."

"Thru for yez, bye. But Oi am afther biziniss now, wid a great big B."

Timothy McGonnigan spoke a little thoughtfully, as though he was perhaps uttering more than his good judgment told him he should.

Buck Barber looked up in anxious surprise.

"Say, pard, yer don't mean thar's a chance ter get a bulge on arybody with ther All Right? Ef we kin—not er cent less than five thousand takes ther ha'f."

"Sure, an' Oi'm thinkin' dhe All Roight wor played out shortly befoure it wor discovered, an' a hoodoo on it to boot. It's not that Oi wor afther alludin' to. It's in me moind to till yez all about it, but Oi want to arrange dhe matter furst. Afther that, will yez shtay wid me?"

"For coin?"

"Hapes av it for a mon that has bin foolin' wid a phroperty loike dhe All Roight."

"Say, you let the All Right alone. It's as good as the most ov 'em, an' it's located ter sell. If yer can't make ther riffle one way yer bound ter do ett another. I ain't minin' fur my health."

Timothy grinned.

He had never shown much respect for the mine in which he was supposed to have an undivided half interest.

After having once looked the shaft over he had closed one eye, and said nothing as he stared his partner in the face.

Yet, on occasion, his tongue had got to running with the outside world, and he seemed to have no objections to assisting to sell the only article of tangible assets left to either of them. He and his partner were more successful at playing draw—which was the true secret of Buck's attachment.

The living was precarious, but up to date, after a fashion, it had sufficed.

They were sitting together in the early part of the evening; and as they had been separated for the most of the day, it was no wonder Buck remarked on the reticence of his companion.

He had had something to say about many things, and the answers of McGonnigan showed he had not much interest in any of them. Even a reference to the call on Clymer, at the bank, did not seem to attract his attention.

In view of this, his statement that he was revolving something important, the nature of which, for the present, he preferred not to disclose, was not much of a surprise, though it greatly excited Buck's curiosity.

It was a preparatory hint, also, to a subsequent broader statement by Timothy that he might have occasion to disappear in the course of the evening, and that he would be apt to put a head on the man who attempted to nose around his business.

One thought suggested itself to Buck.

"Tim, you gave me a hint ter let that dandy sport alone when we f'ust struck him. I ain't sure he ain't hed yer under cow ever sence. You ain't bin liarable ter chip on short notice when he war in sight. Ain't that gospel?"

"Yer no woide av the marruk. Oi towld yez Oi had no use for him, an' that av yez couldn't take advice Oi w'ad let yez rape the consequences. It wor a harvest av chaff most loike so far, but av yez crowd him it may end in a thrashin' ye wad dispoise."

"I ain't bin tryin' ter crowd yer up ag'in him, an' I've let yer laugh when he took my buildin' down frum gerit to cellar. That's all right. He's jest my private meat; an' I'll salt him yit. But you ain't thinkin' ov goin' ag'inst him?"

"Maybe yis, maybe no. Av Oi wor, whoy not?"

"Because he kerries too many guns fur yer. I dunno why you an' me kim ter be pards; but I know sich cattle a heap-sight better ner you. You an' me could double team his tergether; but ef yer goes ett alone he'll wipe ther floor with yer. I've tried him severial times, an' I ought to know."

Buck spoke earnestly. No one who knew him would have supposed him ca-

pable of the feeling he showed; and the very frankness of his speech, though it might be offensive to the Irishman, who was as touchy as the rest of his race, was at the same time impressive.

"Thankee, Buck; yer betther than Oi dr'amed, an' Oi'm not forgittin' av yer advice. But Oi'm a divil at dhe cards; an' betther at some 'ither things whin Oi lit mesilf go. Av Oi take a tumble out av him Oi'll lit yez know in toime to see it, an' av there's shpoils av war, it's yer-silf will come in for dhe half. Lit me alone wid him, an' Oi can take care av mesilf."

After that nothing would have convinced Barber that his friend was not scheming in some way to get even with the man who had several times interfered with his own dignity.

He did ask a few questions; but the answers told him nothing more, and he was left to guess what Timothy could have in view.

He did not, however, intend to allow his friend to have everything entirely his own way.

If he could not be with him, he would, at least, be near enough to watch over him. When, early in the evening, Timothy parted with him, he had not a word to say in objection.

But, he intended to keep him in sight.

As the surest way of accomplishing this he meant to watch out for Cyclone Pete.

He expected the sport, as he began to suppose him to be, to make his appearance at the Dream some time early in the evening, and intended to follow him up from there, and make sure McGonnigan came to no harm.

Incidentally, he would perhaps find out what sort of a movement his partner really expected to carry out.

In that way he lost the little matter in the vicinity of the bank, which he would have dropped on if he had made the hotel his starting point on the trail.

More than that; though he witnessed the arrival of the sport at the saloon, and noted, too, that Tim was keeping in the distance, he was thrown off a little later on, when Smith temporarily retired to his own room.

He followed him to the hotel, and waited for some little time, but as he did not come out he returned to take up the trail of his pard.

From the Dream Timothy had certainly disappeared; nor was it so easy to get upon his track. When he approached a place of resort, Buck did it carefully, for he desired to see without being seen.

At the Early Dawn he did not find the Irishman himself; but obtained some information which started him out on a new trail altogether.

As he leaned over the bar, waiting for the dispenser to set out his vanity, the tumbler juggler, who was waiting on several others in advance, carelessly remarked:

"Say, you better be looking after that red-headed pard of yours. He is in blamed bad company, and filling himself up full as a lord."

"Let him fill—as long as t'other galoot foots ther bill."

"Didn't look to me as though it was going just that way. Tim had a nice little pocket full of rocks, and was spreading them out every time the imbrocation was called for."

"Oh, Timmy hez a long head, an' kin kerry ez much ez ther next. I'll trust him ter take keer ov his sheer ov ther clean-up in ther solid All Right."

"Just as you have it, old man, just as you have it; but he's set in to paint things red, or I'm 'way off. From the little sample he showed, I judge he's a bad man when he gets going—and the pard he's picked up looks as though he might be worse. I only thought maybe you'd care to look after him a trifle."

If Buck had not been able to read between the lines, the information would perhaps have worried him.

Up to date, his pard had never been a

hard drinker, but had shown an ability to carry whatever amount he chose to put down. There was something behind this, though; and this stranger was a man he was bound to see.

The pair were not keeping themselves hidden at all, but Buck was cautious, and when he had heard of them at the Red Light, as putting on numerous frills, and had satisfied himself again, from a description, that this other man was a stranger to himself and Running Gear, he bent his steps thitherward.

He was just in time, for, as he came in sight of the doorway, two men came out, arm in arm, and staggered off at a gait which took up the greater part of the street.

To say that Buck was thunderstruck was to say little.

If this was acting, it was so near the perfect thing that he did not believe in it.

But, if it was acting, what was it all about? Up to date, McGonnigan had never shown any desire to go into any little, ten-cent games; or, in fact, any that were worse or more desperate than a bout at the card table—where he had always managed to hold his own.

This fellow did not look as though he could be worth the robbing, yet, what else could be the meaning of it all. Perhaps he had made a miraculous strike.

In that case, Mike might be after immediate knowledge rather than coin. He would follow after and see. Whatever was going he was entitled to a share; and his help might be needed.

The two turned off the street, and as they did so grew more brotherly.

They snuggled up closer to each other, and talked at random about things which Buck could not understand, from the few words he caught.

Were they going out to some mine, or were they going to a certain deserted cabin which Barber knew of?

Buck would have crept closer, but he knew that if this was a game, the man who played it would be on the alert, and twice as vigilant as under ordinary circumstances.

He dared not close up sufficiently to catch the conversation, which became more and more confidential.

Suddenly, the stranger halted, and he could hear his voice raised in drunken protest.

What followed was scarcely unexpected, though it came something in the nature of a surprise, after all.

Without a word of warning, Timothy steadied himself, and shot out his fist into the face of his companion.

The man went to the ground like a lump of lead, and without delay McGonnigan sprang upon him.

He raised the head and shoulders of the senseless man from the ground, and dragged him away.

"Wall, I swar!"

No man could have had a more sudden revelation in regard to a surprising mistake. Tim was a better, or worse, man than he had thought. Did he mean to finish with murder? He was bound to see; and followed a trifle more recklessly. Had it not been for the warning he had received early in the evening, he might even have offered to take a hand in the affair.

McGonnigan appeared reckless of consequences now. He made his way directly to the cabin already mentioned, and with his victim still well in hand, disappeared through the doorway.

"Ef I only knowed he warn't a lookin' I'd take er squint inside. But Timmy ain't no fool, an' he'll be watchin' out to make sure he ain't bin spotted. I'll hev' ter give him time ter git away with ther sequins an' mebbe ther corpus. Ef I moved up on him now he'd mebbe shoot 'thout lookin'."

So reasoned Buck within himself, and he still remained crouching at his post, fifty yards away from the shanty.

If he imagined McGonnigan was going to linger he was badly mistaken.

In a very brief period of time he came out again, and alone.

At least, that was what Buck thought until he obtained a fairer view of the man, who had turned from the cabin at a course at right angles to the one by which he had approached it.

Then, came another surprise.

"Holy smoke! ett's ther other feller ez come out!"

Surely, this man was taller, burlier than his old pard. Buck's revolver came out and went up; but his thumb failed to make the motion which would have caused a sharp click to echo on the night air. He would have to shoot after that; and perhaps the time for that had not yet come.

"I kin ketch him afore he kin git out ov ther camp; an' I better see f'ust what's become of Timmy. I've seen sum queer games in my time, an' ett never hurts ter go slow."

So he thought to himself; and went swiftly and silently toward the hut. He cared little for being seen, now. His hand was on his revolver, and he would have shot at a second's notice.

The other party, however, kept on his way, without even a backward glance, and Buck stepped within the cabin.

All was black darkness there, but he could feel in some indescribable way that he was not alone.

He lit a match, and found that he was within a yard of a motionless human body.

Bending over, he held the match down to the bloody face.

The man was a perfect stranger.

"Timmy, sog gone yer hide!"

That was all that Buck could say in the first surprise which came over him. Then, he examined his find more thoroughly.

The man was more drunk than hurt, and was tied hand and foot in a way which was creditable to McGonnigan's abilities in that line. He was only partially clad, however, which explained what the watcher had seen. Timothy had stripped him, and gone off in his outer garments.

There must be something behind all this which he had not begun to fathom. For some reason the Irishman needed those clothes as a disguise, and it was not hard to guess he intended to meet some one in them.

The fellow was in little danger of coming to harm; and if he had been Buck would not have stopped for that just then.

He simply made himself sure of the facts in the case as far as they showed on the surface. It was no use to look further, for it was not likely Tim had left anything behind which would tell tales. Before the second match had burned out Barber was ready. Tossing the tiny torch aside, he hastened out into the night and struck a bee line for the spot where he had last sen his pard, McGonnigan.

Luck favored him.

He found Timothy without being discovered himself; and at the same time he found some more men who looked like him. He could not tell which was which; but he was sure McGonnigan was one of them.

"He's got more nerve than a meat axe," muttered Buck to himself, as he watched hem.

"Thar's a racket ov sum kind, an' I'll be 'round ter see my partner through when ther pinch kims. Ett may be a case ov hard shootin' an' sudden death, but, he'll find me thar."

Anxiously he waited in the distance, not knowing what was to come, nor how soon he might have to fight for his own life upon discovery.

After a time there was a shrill whistle, and at the signal the skulking men darted away in the direction of the sound. In their wake went Buck Barber.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CYCLONE IS CHAINED.

Viewed in any light, the way the banker appropriated the letter was a revelation to the detective.

Either he was willing to take something which did not belong to him for the sake of some possible benefit, or it was only returning to him after passing through several intermediate hands.

For, in the assailant, Smith was sure he recognized the man he had detected lurking around the bank, and from whom he more than suspected Miss Tamar had received the letter.

It began to look as though the document had been stolen by him from the banker, and it was possibly the belief that it was the latter who had snatched from the faro-dealer which caused the attack. What was there in it so important, that all the world of Running Gear did not know?"

The question was a puzzle.

A man was not going to risk his life to obtain it without some reason; and Smith thought his whilom friend had not seen the last of the man who was so eager for the document.

This was one reason why the detective bowed himself away from Miss Tamar, and followed the course taken by the banker.

He was not altogether certain that his coming had been judicious, for he had been too late to make it of value, and it might barely be possible Clymer would suspect him of being in some way a confederate of the assailant, who seemed as unknown to the one as to the other. If opportunity offered, Smith wanted to make a little explanation. He had not been watching the banker; and his arrival was only a matter of chance.

He supposed, of course, that the banker was going to direct his steps toward the Bald Eagle, where he boarded. Having left the bank, and left the Dream, and its presiding dignity, there was no other place he would be apt to go.

Somewhat to his surprise, the detective discovered he had been mistaken.

He easily found Clymer; and being an adept in trailing, kept him in sight without much danger of being observed, though he was not at all sure the man in front was as careless as he looked.

If anything, he was too careless.

"Looks as though he was just itching for some one to run foul of him, and if he carries his nose 'way up in the air much longer I'm not sure but what I'll have to do it for him, if he can't find any one else. Wonder if he expects his man to turn up again?"

So the detective thought; and he had pretty good judgment. A man was not likely to go wandering around the streets of Running Gear at that time of night without some object in view. The walking was none too good by daylight.

There was just a possibility the banker was laying for him, or he would have closed up, when he would be in reaching distance in case anything did happen.

With both of them on the watch—and they had sharp eyes, too—it seemed as though one or the other ought to scent danger before it actually had a chance to strike, yet two men were badly fooled.

Out of the very ground a figure arose, which was seen by neither until with all the silent ferocity of a wild beast it had fallen on the banker.

Yet, this time, Clymer was not taken altogether off his guard, and if his assailant struck, the blow did not go home, and he closed in on something like even terms.

"Reckon I can't go wrong on the skulking scoundrel. I never had mercy for that sort," thought Smith, as, careless now of being seen, he dashed forward toward the two men, who appeared to be locked together in a life-and-death struggle.

Not a word had been uttered; but he heard a single shrill whistle arise from the melee, and that hastened his steps.

It seemed to him this time the assassin was not altogether alone, and an answering whistle served to still further quicken his steps.

He knew in such a scrimmage it would not be best to resort to firearms, unless for self-protection against numbers, but if he got Clymer posted, so that there was no danger of his mistaking him for a foe, there was little fear in his mind of the result.

The two men were struggling with their arms entwined. As he came up one of them went down.

Which one remained uppermost was not so easy to see just then, for they were away from the immediate neighborhood of houses. The detective rather thought it was Wayne Clymer, and bent over to make sure.

It was an unfortunate movement for him. In his interest he did not hear the coming footsteps, which were close at hand, and there was one closer than all the rest.

Without a particle of hesitation he cast himself headlong at the unsuspecting spectator, pinning him from behind, and then deliberately falling backward, taking his captor with him.

As long as that grip held, Smith was powerless, for anything but a yell, and yelling was not in his line. That he would put up a hard fight when the opportunity came went without saying, but somehow the opportunity did not arrive.

The one pair of hands seemed to multiply to a dozen, and he had an indistinct vision of forms flitting around for an instant.

Then everything grew dark. Some one had thrown a blanket over his head to shut out any further chance for sight, and he was bound, gagged, and blindfolded in a manner more expeditious than he had heretofore dreamed of.

As the bandage over his eyes passed also around his ears, he heard none too well.

As near as he could make out, one of the combatants, if not both, shared the same fate. He began to see there was more in this attack than he had at first suspected.

If there was any mistake, he was sure there was no present chance for him to rectify it. The men—and there were not less than half a dozen of them—had cleverly captured him, and they did not intend to let him go.

There were a few whispered words, which he could not possibly make out, and then he was hurried away.

So far he had not received the least harm, except to his pride, and his wits were all about him.

Unless greatly mistaken, there was at least one more prisoner—perhaps there were two. There were also several cocked revolvers enforcing a gruff command to move on as a directing hand should guide him.

He was aware that under such circumstances an order was not likely to be merely a bluff—and he moved. After a march of a few minues a halt was made and four men seemed to seize him. They threw him on the back of a horse, and again he was on the move, wondering with all his might what this thing might mean.

Were the two men he had seen locked in each other's arms both along, and if so, were both of them prisoners?

Puzzling himself over such questions, he made no motion toward testing his bonds, or rubbing the bandage from his eyes. A low-growled warning had been given him that anything of the kind might prove fatal, and his experience told him that such warnings had best be heeded.

If he was in the hands of outlaws his life would go for little if they considered their own safety at stake.

He had known of more than one case where the life of a man had been deliberately ended. The only question he was nervously anxious to solve was whether Wayne Clymer was in the same boat.

It struck him that their simultaneous disappearance, or the death on the spot of the financial magnate, would make his own return to Running Gear impossible without some preliminary explanation. While in time he could establish his own reliability, in the first gush of public wrath there was no doubt that even a breath of suspicion directed toward him would be sufficient to rouse the community.

At that moment it might have been more to his comfort if he had not remembered the feud which had been created with Buck Barber. Could it be possible Buck was responsible for this whole affair?

He listened eagerly, attentively, to note if any familiar voice came to his ears, but there was no sound beyond a murmur at odd times, and the steady thump, thump of horse's feet. If there was another prisoner he was probably in the same plight as himself; while the captors continued bent upon silence.

The ride was exasperatingly long and wearisome.

Before it came to an end the detective felt stiff and sore in every bone, for it is one thing to be sitting on one's own accord on the back of a free-going saddle horse, and another to be tightly strapped to a led animal, whose gait is perforce confined to that of others.

Finally, however, it seemed to him that it was about to cease. The gait of the horsemen slackened, and he could even distinguish a few gruffly spoken words of command. An ascent of some kind was made, and then all came to a stop.

Perhaps his listless, half-fainting manner made the men careless, for they dragged him off the horse in a rough manner, and in so doing the bandage was pushed from his eyes.

Yes, Philadelphia Smith was very much awake in spite of his late appearance, and perhaps he made a movement which his captors felt if they did not see.

In the dim light of the early dawn his eyes ran over the group, and fell upon the form of a man, bound like himself, who was being handed down from the saddle with rather more care than had been employed in his case.

Only a glimpse he had. Then he heard a rough curse from behind at the carelessness which had given away so much which should have remained concealed, and he received a blow on the head which knocked him senseless.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SPORT DETECTIVE CALLS THE TURN.

If the intention was that the detective should not see who his fellow-prisoner was the blow came too late.

Though the view was fleeting, and the light uncertain, yet he was sure he recognized Wayne Clymer.

That is, he was sure when he thought the matter over, but for some little time he was sure of nothing, and did not even know that much, for he was carried away from the spot in a comatose condition.

When he came to himself he was a sore-headed young man, who could not move an inch by reason of the ropes which still encircled him, and he was lying in an apartment which he took to be a section of a cave.

It had a dead, underground sort of a smell, and the walls around, which he could dimly see by the light of an ill-trimmed lantern, were of solid rock.

"Dumped me down here to die," thought the Silk Hat Detective with something more nearly a groan than had often come from his lips.

"Plain as day, I cut no great ice in their plans. Just as I thought, I was taken along to keep me from giving an alarm or an explanation. The wonder is, they didn't cut my throat somewhere on the way—I reckon I'm still alive."

The ludicrous anxiety with which he asked himself that question must be pardoned, for he was not yet altogether in his right mind. He had never felt ex-

actly this way before, and was just dazed enough to fancy that perhaps he might be dead after all.

Everything around him, however, proved to be very earthy, and he went back to his speculations.

"From the way they have treated me it is clear they don't care whether I live or die, and I want to be on my guard. This is a place where it won't pay to be fresh. If they do turn up to look after me I'll play, I'm as glad to see them as though they were my Dutch uncles. But if I see a chance and don't take it, I'll deserve the murder that will come later on, if they really do away with Clymer. If I could save him I reckon they wouldn't care to bother further with me. They would be willing to turn me loose and let me go—for a compensation, anyhow."

This was the way he thought it out; and so, when, after what seemed the lapse of hours, though it was really not more than twenty minutes, he heard coming footsteps, he was resolved to be on his good behavior.

The man who came was certainly on his, for he never uttered a word.

He picked up the lantern and held it over the detective's face, to whom it seemed actually a relief to meet the keen eyes which stared into his own.

"I'm alive, if that's what you are after; but how long I'll last depends. If you don't want murder on your soul you had better give the blood a little better chance to circulate. It feels as though it was all tied up."

Very gently did Philadelphia Smith make his suggestion, and there was a world of truth in it, but it did not seem to strike the attention of his visitor to any great extent.

He placed the lantern again on the ground so the light should shine on the detective's face, and then seated himself, staring at the prisoner through the eyelet holes of the mask which covered his face, with great, shining eyes.

They glowed with light which Smith did not think he had ever seen before, and he shivered in spite of himself, as he more than half thought he had been turned over to the mercy of a madman.

The silence which followed was horribly oppressive, and the detective was the one to finally break it.

"My friend, you must see there has been a mistake somewhere. You and I have never met before, and I am sure I hope we shall never meet again. At the same time, I am a gentleman of some account in the world, and if I should happen to disappear it will not be suffered to go unnoticed. I am willing to bury the hatchet, if it is done blamed soon. If it is not, one way or the other, you are apt to get into a peck of trouble. Speak quick, for the longer I think of it the madder I will be getting."

The other shook his head slowly, as though he did not comprehend.

Nevertheless, he reached over and deliberately began to loosen the bands which confined the hands of the detective.

It was high time something of the kind was done. For some minutes Smith was almost powerless to move his fingers, though he tried to start the circulation again by vigorous rubbing.

Gradually he recovered the power, however, and when he had snapped his fingers, and given a low sigh of content over the new phase of things, his visitor placed in his hands a paper on which a few words were written and a pencil.

Smith looked the document over, and gave utterance to a whistle.

"Blame my skins if he ain't deaf and dumb! This is a lively state of affairs!"

This was his exclamation; yet he was not altogether satisfied. The question written upon the paper was:

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Though he uttered his words aloud they did not seem to reach the ears of the other, who frowned, and pointed to the paper.

"Oh, thunder! If you're bona fide, you ought to understand this, and it won't take half as long."

Using the finger alphabet, with one hand, he rapidly spelled off:

"Unless you are afraid of some one looking on, why not use this?"

"All right, answer my questions."

If Smith wanted to find out whether his visitor really was deaf and dumb he learned nothing. The answering fingers flew as swiftly as his own, or more so. The man was as much of an expert as he was.

It is not worth while to detail the conversation which followed.

The prisoner told his story, keeping as near the truth as he knew how, and though the telling perhaps took a little longer than it would have done by word of mouth, no doubt it gained in accuracy.

"What did you mix in the matter for?"

"I didn't mix for a cent," was his answer. "Just looked on to see which was coming on top, and some one downed me. That man was a bigger fool than I was."

"Bad for you to be on the spot. It was the only thing he could do. You have made trouble for us and for yourself."

"No need for that. What do you want of me?"

The man looked him over grimly, and then drew the edge of his hand across his throat with a significant gesture.

"When?"

Smith was cool enough to ask the question as though it was simply a matter of curiosity, in which he had no great concern; but inwardly he was not so fully at ease. From the first he had feared his life went with that of his companion prisoner, who, he was now well assured, was Clymer.

Of course, he did not intend to throw away a chance if it turned up, but so far he had none, and he was afraid this man did not intend to give him any. Who was he?

The man paid no attention to the question. Swiftly he spelled out:

"There is a guard who has orders to shoot you down if you attempt to escape. He will look in on you, and it will be bad if he finds you moving. Beware."

"Beware yourself!" retorted the detective snappishly as the other turned away.

"If I don't bring you to the rope it will be because I broke a promise for the first time in my life. Everything looks to be on your side, but you are not done with me yet."

Not a word of it did the man appear to catch. He did not even seem aware the prisoner had spoken, and stalked out of the place without ever looking behind.

"That settles it. If he could have heard what I said he would have been more than mortal not to turn and give me as good as I sent. He means business—and so do I."

The advantage was certainly with the outlaw, even though he had not thought it worth while to rebind the hands of the prisoner.

Of course, Smith had been stripped of his weapons, and his ankles were still tightly knotted together.

He was in no hurry about attempting to loosen the remaining cords.

He was looking for another visitor—and was not disappointed. Ten minutes later a man appeared—masked like the other, but more roughly dressed—who brought with him the materials for a substantial, though rude, breakfast.

This man was silent also, and kept a wary eye on the prisoner while placing the food within reach.

The moment he was gone Smith fell to. His danger had not taken his appetite, and the coarse meal gave him strength and hope. Now it was that he applied himself to unknotting the cords around his lower limbs, and, though they were tightly drawn, they finally yielded to his strong and skillful fingers.

"That's what they intended me to do,"

he said to himself as he silently staggered to his feet, and tried his cramped limbs.

"They couldn't shoot me down in cold blood, but I'll wager two to one they are waiting for the chance to do it in the hullabaloo of an escape. They know who I am—and I believe I know who the deaf and dumb gentleman is, though it's something of a revelation. A little more than even money that he is the real, actual Goldbug, who runs this gang.

"Does Miss Tamar Templeton know it also?"

The last question was an important one, and there were reasons why it should be answered in the affirmative, though this was the first time it had presented itself to the detective.

His mind, like his limbs, seemed recovering the powers which had been cramped so long, and though he did not see a way open for immediate action, he was more and more becoming ready for it, even if, at that moment, he could not strike in at his best.

"Looks to me," he continued to himself, "as though, where there is one woman in a riot, there will always be another one found. What had she to do with the taking away of Miss Carmen Carter?"

The mystery was more complicated than he thought, and yet it was not the one he cared to consider further at this moment. He laid it aside, now that he once noted its existence, and devoted himself to a consideration of his present position. He found himself ready to move, and crouching low, close to the wall, he made his way toward the opening through which his visitors had departed.

He was sure the warning he had received was not an empty one, and that there was a guard who commanded the opening; but he was willing to run some risks for the sake of obtaining a glimpse of how the land lay beyond.

Cautiously he peered, crouching low, so that his face would be less likely to attract attention.

He looked out into a room of considerable extent, open upon one side to the light of day, which streamed in through a wide crevice.

Of course, there were shadows, and places where the darkness was almost unbroken, but he could well understand that the entrance to his cell was visible to the man who lounged not far away, his face in that direction.

Though he had obtained the glimpse without being seen, Smith drew back swiftly. He was weaponless, while the guard had a revolver lying handy.

Further on, three or four men were lying on blankets. Sound asleep though they might be, a slight sound would bring them to their feet, prepared for war. The detective's time for action had not yet come. He knew something of the lay of the ground—now, he must lay out the campaign.

Yet, if he had not been thoroughly on guard, he might at that moment have been led to immediate and rash action.

There came to his ears suddenly a sound which would arouse him sooner than anything else on earth.

It was the cry of a woman in distress.

"Ah, it may be a trap," he muttered, though he felt his pulses quicken as he listened for a repetition.

"But trap or no trap, there is no use for me to move out until the cyclone is all ready to burst."

He gathered himself for a spring as he heard the cry again, followed by confusion in the outer apartment, and he looked out to make sure of the way, before he made the effort.

He caught a glimpse of a female figure dodging past the two or three men who tried hastily to spring into her path. It came toward the opening, where he crouched, and behind came a masked man.

He stepped back and to one side, so that he should not frighten her, saw her

rush past him, and again he fronted the opening, his fist drawn back.

An instant later the masked man appeared, hard on the heels of the fugitive, and, stepping firmly in, the detective let go, straight as an arrow.

CHAPTER XXI.

WAYNE CLYMER'S TRUMP CARDS.

From the first, Philadelphia Smith was satisfied the feminine cry could proceed from but one pair of lips; and, though he would have acted as promptly for any other woman, there was a peculiar satisfaction in delivering a blow for the sake of Carmen Carter.

He did not stop to analyze the feeling, however. He was aware that one down another would be apt to come on, and the time given him for preparation would doubtless be brief.

As the man dropped like a log under his stroke, he leaped upon him, and tore away his belt, which was well freighted with weapons.

Then he sprang back, whipping out the revolver he had captured, and taking his place in front of the woman, who crouched in the furthest corner.

"Keep cool," he muttered, in a tone barely loud enough to reach her ears.

"Win or lose we'll stay together. I ought to be out there spreading myself, but unless you will run the risk along with me, I'll hold the fort right here.

"That man!" exclaimed the lady—and it was with the voice of Carmen.

"Well thought of—if you did think. We'll have him as a hostage. He won't move for five minutes by the watch unless he's assisted, and his friends seem a little slow to chip in. Must think he is equal to the occasion."

Swiftly, but with an eye on the opening, Smith slipped back to the side of the prostrate man and seized him by the collar with one hand, with the other grasping the lantern, which still burned with a sickly flame.

He came back with a rush, and, producing the cords which had held his own limbs, twisted them around wrists and ankles of his insensible captive. It was all done so swiftly that he was free to turn his attention to them before the men outside had decided that perhaps their duty called them to see what had happened within the cell, whence no sound now came.

One of them crept up to the opening and spoke in a low tone.

"Say, boss, if you don't need us it's all right; but if you want us to chip say the word."

The "boss" was not in condition to say anything, and the two others remained silent.

A conference began outside.

Discipline among the Goldbugs had been reduced to an exact science, and the men were aware of the fact that a tumultuous intrusion on the chief, unless under orders, or for fair reasons, would be apt to receive sharp rebuke.

The detective heard if the boss did not; and it gave him subject for thought. They ought to know whether their chief could hear. If this was the man who visited him, then, he had been a fraud. When the time came he would investigate.

Once more the query was cautiously repeated, and then the man at the feet of the detective gave a groan. Consciousness was returning at last, and his jaw was not fractured after all.

The sound reached the listening ears outside, and the men waited no longer, but cautiously made their way forward until a sharp order caused them to halt.

"You, there, put the brakes on, and let's see what this all means. Keep your hands down, now. The first that raises a finger will chew lead."

The three men halted. The lantern was near to the middle of the narrow apartment, and cast its beams faintly in every direction. They could see dimly just the same as they were seen, and at the fur-

ther end stood a man with the drop on them. At his feet lay the groaning outlaw, and a little to the rear crouched the form of the woman who had fled thither.

"Steady, now, I have you foul, and if you try to crowd me what will I be doing to your captain? Flag of truce, boys, till we see if there isn't a way out of this hopple without burning powder."

There was some sort of an answer, though it was too low for him to hear. Before he could decide what was best for him to do the three had flung themselves backward and disappeared.

"Mighty sudden panic, and I suppose I ought to have tried to stop it," grumbled the sport detective; "but, I swear, a man hates to shoot a fellow for trying to get out of his sight, and something of that kind was the only thing. Now, let's see what is the matter with our friend here, and what can be done with him."

He stooped over his prisoner and gave him a shake, but was hardly prepared for the words that responded to the action.

"Be aizey wid me, me fri'nd; an' av ye can't be aizey be az aizey az ye kin."

"Great guns and little shooters, if it ain't Tim McGonnigan!"

There was no mistaking that voice, yet the detective hastily tore away the mask to make sure his ears had not played tricks with his brain.

The face revealed, however, was the one he expected to find, though it was none too clearly seen in the dim light.

"Say, Timothy, I've given you credit for a heap of things; but being Captain Goldbug for sure was not one of them. Where's that delectable side pard of yours? Somehow, I faintly suspicioned him; but my thoughts never would have run to you. And I suspect he is the boss of the outfit, after all."

"It's shtruck wid lightnin' Oi wor, an' ontoirely onsensible up to dhe presint toime. This comes av foolin' wid dhe conducter."

To himself Timothy appeared to be muttering, and he paid no attention to the remarks of the other. He had just about recovered enough to imagine he had received an electric shock, and not enough to listen to suggestions from the outside world.

Miss Carter was recovering more rapidly. She recognized the sport detective, and was apparently overjoyed to meet him.

"It is you again, is it?" she asked, laying a hand on the arm of the sport.

"Thank heaven I have found a protector in whom I can trust. That villain is even worse than his friend; and he was bad enough. You will help me to escape from this terrible den?"

"If I get away you may be sure you will not be left behind. But if Buck Barber has anything to do with it, I'm not sure that I care to go until I have evened matters with that gentleman. We have had several little discussions so far, and I begin to be tired."

"No, no. He is not here. At least, I have seen nothing of him; and this man has made his appearance but just now. I—I do not understand it at all, myself."

"Bad louck to yer want av undershtandin', az made dhe trouble. Av ye'd had dhe undershtandin' av a cowld boiled p'ratie it's not here we'd bin loying."

Timothy was recovering, for he was able to understand the drift of Carmen's remarks, and was looking very keenly at her companion and supporter. The answer which was on the end of Philadelphia Smith's tongue was cut short by a hail from without.

"Say, you in thar, are yer willin' ter lis'sen ter reason?"

"Every time. Let's hear what sort of a plan you are going to propose."

"We ain't meaning any harm to ther young lady; and like as not none to you. But, we got to keep yer both till we see how ther cat are goin' ter hop; an' we ain't goin' ter 'low yer ter be kicking over ther traces tergether. We want yer

all both ter step out with yer hands up, and we'll arrange things ter avoid trouble."

"I guess not—at the present time. We can hold this till our friends get along—they're on the road now—and then we'll take you front and rear. What's left of you shortly after that won't be apt to cut much figure in the road-agent business of the future. You better pull out of this while you have the chance."

Smith was cool as an iceberg, and playing a bluff hand for all it was worth. If the three men, who had entered the room, were all he had against him, he had little fear of the result if it came to a show down. If the gang who had made him captive was all in supporting distance that was something else.

"Jest ez you hev it, pard. You'll git mighty tired in there when the light goes out. We kin afford ter wait till yer gits a bit tamer. Hev it yer own way."

There was a sudden change in the tone of the outlaw, and his word ended in a bang, as though a heavy door had suddenly been slammed into place between them.

"Heavens! They have shut us in here to starve!" exclaimed Carmen, with a shudder.

"Scarcely. You are too valuable an article to be treated in that way; and Timothy, here, is a hostage, though I am not sure exactly how highly they will value him. They will take another look at us before we die of old age."

"Don't yez be so sure av that," said McGonnigan, speaking up. "Oi begins to say where Oi am at, an' Oi forgive yez the poul, for sure an' ye did not understand dhe schame Oi wor workin'; an' no more did dhe young liddy."

"Timothy, the less you remark at present the easier I will be apt to let you off. If I should happen to carry you back to Running Gear, they would just hang you off hand, and that would be too dreadful. If you'll keep your mouth closed while I think over the position I may allow you just one more chance for your white alley, but if you are too exasperating I may proceed to execution right now, and all by my lonesome self."

The threat had its weight, for Smith talked as though he meant it. Timothy subsided, and the detective listened to what was going on outside; and thought while he listened.

Whatever were the intentions of the outlaws, they were certainly building up a wall of rock beyond the plank door with which they had closed the entrance. That sounded as though they were going to make this thing permanent. Carmen was too much frightened to care to talk, and the Irishman was sulking under that last rebuff. The situation became more and more perplexing.

An hour or so wore away, in which time the detective thoroughly explored the small room which was their prison, and more than once listened eagerly at the door. He began to think that sooner or later he might have to attack the wood with the knife he had captured, though the time for that had not yet arrived.

The lantern had been turned down so that the faintest of gleams showed the flame was but barely alive. The little oil in it had to be carefully husbanded if they did not want to be left completely and irremediably in the dark.

Then, at the rear of the cell, and as though it came from the solid rock, the detective heard a faint tapping. It might be intended for a signal, and he answered it in the same way.

After that it was no great surprise when a segment of the rock moved, and an opening was disclosed.

"This way, and be quick about it," whispered a voice. "The villains are planning a surprise. There is no time to explain further. Let the young lady come through, and then follow yourself, as swiftly as you can."

Without hesitation Carmen crept through the opening, and Smith followed.

"I have a prisoner in there," he whispered; "and I swear I don't know whether I oughtn't to bring him along. How is the walking?"

"Bad," said the other, shortly. "Let him stand there. The gang proposed to have no mercy on me, and I don't propose to have much for any of the gang. I'll talk about it again."

"So it's Wayne Clymer, after all?" ejaculated Smith, as he took a closer look at the speaker.

"Yes, but—hush! I will tell you all later on. This way."

He pried back the rock to its former place as he spoke, and then turned to lead the way from the spot.

CHAPTER XXII.

TIM MCGONNIGAN'S TROUBLES.

"Murther! Robbery! Sure, an' dhe pris'ners wor eschapin'!"

As the rock settled back into its place the voice of Tim McGonnigan was raised in no uncertain sound. Whether it could reach through door and wall to the men gathered without was a question he did not stop to consider; but he used his lungs for all they were worth.

After a few minutes of outcry, he seemed to have attracted attention. There was a knock on the door, and a smothered voice.

"What's goin' on in thar. D'yer want ter come ter terms?"

"Terms, did yez say? Tare an' 'ouns! Dhere's no wan lift to come to 'em but mesilf; an' sure Oi am noboddy, at all, at all."

After that it did not take long to convey the intelligence that in some way the prisoners were escaping; but the outlaws moved slowly.

The door opened again in course of time, but even then the men were slow to enter; holding a conference at a distance first. Then, one of them cautiously came forward with drawn revolvers, to make sure there was no deception in the story.

If the result of the investigation was not a real surprise, it was certainly a perfect imitation. Two of the prisoners, who ought to have been imbedded in the solid rock, as it were, had vanished; and the third one was a mystery.

"Come out of this," said the leading spirit of the outlaws, carelessly cutting loose the ropes at Timothy's ankles.

"We got onto it that you were a fraud when we saw you huddled out on the floor; and we made it up to keep you all three till the boss came. Who are you, and how do you come here? You don't belong to the gang. How did you get in, and what were you doing?"

"Sure, an' Oi come wid it, all dhe same. It's mesilf dhe boss picked up at Runnin' Gear; most loike in place av a better won. Oi'm not sayin'. Oi wor makin' mesilf at home, an' not bein' wise in dhe ways av dhe place, shtumbled acrost dhe young liddy. Whin she schramed Oi lost me sinces ontoirely, an' got into dhe schrape ave me loife. Dhe way Oi wor tr'ated shows who wor me fri'nd."

There was an element of truth about the story. In no other way could his presence there be accounted for. Yet, that he had been enlisted by the captain was so wildly improbable his hearers refused to believe it.

Whatever the ultimate result might be, however, the story was almost good enough to secure immediate safety, though his leading inquisitor shook his head dubiously as he asked:

"And supposing that sort of a fairy tale don't go down, what do you think we are going to do with you?"

"What better would ye be afther doin' than to shwear me in? An' av ye wants anither good mon, there's me soide pard, Buck Barber. Sure, an' there's little doin' at the All Roight, an' till he foindes the vein ag'in it's not he wou'd be afther hesitatin' to take a turn on dhe road."

"Buck Barber? I'm afraid, if that is the sort of company you keep, you will not do for us. We have to draw a line somewhere, even in the road-agent profession. He is too quick with his mouth and too slow with his gun. Probably you are of the same sort, if you are what you profess."

"Sure, an' what ilse could Oi be?" "You could be a measly detective, and no Irishman at all. When the captain returns he can make up his mind on that point. If you are a fraud, of course there is only one way. A dead detective is the only good detective."

"Och! An' ye wouldn't be afther murtherin' me, whin Oi hilped in dhe abdoocshun, an' give yez warnin' whin the pris'ners wor afther gittin' away."

"That's just the trouble. Your warning came after they were gone; and we are not sure just now whether they ever were there. They couldn't pass through the solid rock; and unless you can show some other way we will believe you stayed behind to help them off."

"Warra, me, but dhat wor hard on Tim McGonnigan. Oi couldn't say in dhe darruk, could Oi? Oi ownly knowed they wor goin, an' that Oi towld yez."

"You seem to know too blamed much and too confounded little. I begin to think your memory requires a bit of refreshing. Bring him along, boys. There's a cedar just outside that has the proper pitch. If he happens to hang too long before he talks, we can bury his bones and say nothing more about him."

The number of outlaws at the rendezvous had increased during the time of the captivity of the three; and while there were several still hunting over the cell for the way in which the escaped prisoners made their exit, there were half a dozen around Timothy, all of whom seemed satisfied with this proposal.

If McGonnigan had made the least show of resistance they would have been ready enough to drag him along.

Timothy, however, knew that in such a matter it was best to imitate Captain Scott's coon, and come down just as far as he was able.

"L'ade me to dhe scaffold, av yez choose, but whin dhe well wor droy ye can't exthraet wather av yez poump iver so harrud. Av yez make me a marthyr to dhe truth, it's yer captain will make yez pay for it."

"Rats! We don't take stock in such stuff. Come along. When you have swung on nothing a few seconds you will be ready to tell a different story."

"Not av Oi have to doie for dhe truth."

"You'll die, sure enough, if you don't explain better what has become of the missing parties."

The outlaw spoke hastily, and with an inflection of rising anger.

There were other men beside him who seemed to think the same way. The effort to find the well-concealed outlet appeared to be given up altogether.

"All roight, thin. Av yez can't be aizey, do the bist ye can."

The Irishman spoke with a sigh; but did not cringe nor show fear. If he understood his danger he certainly had a wonderful amount of nerve. Though his hands were still tightly bound, he walked briskly toward the place of execution.

He might, perhaps, have forgotten that though they had spoken of saving him for the decision of the captain, yet, when such rough play once begins, it is hard to tell where it will stop.

The tree was there, sure enough! a marked object from anywhere in rock-encircled little nook, whose walls reached up heavenward, and in all directions shut off connection with the outer world.

That there was a line of exit Timothy knew as well as the rest, for had he not traveled it on the way thither? To find it now would be a puzzle.

Though he had been questioned by but the one man, there seemed no difference of opinion. Ugly looks were cast on him, and he heard what well might mean a death sentence from every lip.

"Thar's no outsider would be hyer unless he war a detective—hang him up," was the growl from the outlaw who strode at his side, a hand on his shoulder; and this was echoed all around.

The tree jutted out from a little platform of rock, near to the mouth of the cave. A noosed rope was flung over a stout stub of a branch. Then a running loop was placed over his head, and tightened on his neck.

"Look over the edge and see where you will land when we swing you off. If you go I'm not sure you will ever be able to speak again. Open up to bed rock, or over it is."

Timothy's tongue could be seen to moisten his dry lips as he took in the prospect, and there was an anxious shade in his eyes; but he showed no other signs of weakening.

"Murther me av ye will, but ye'll shlay a mon az came here az a fri'nd."

"If you had kept with the gang you wouldn't have come to trouble till the captain found you out. When you tried to play off boss it opened out your hand far enough to show it was crooked. One last chance is for you. What did you come here for?"

"Av Oi haven't towld, you tell. Sure, an' Oi can say no more."

His nerve pleased them, though they believed he was only making a bluff. Had some one man started the movement the rest might have been willing to cry halt.

No one else cared to speak first, and the leader looked grimly from one to another, and then spoke:

"That settles it. All together, and over with him."

There was a rush forward, and Timothy went out into the air and then dropped downward.

At the same time, there was a sharp report from the rocks above, and the wicked "ping" of a bullet cutting the air. The hat of the leader flew off, though he remained unharmed.

Every man sprang back to cover, without a single glance in the direction whence the shot had come.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HUNG BY THE NECK.

Philadelphia Smith was not particularly a vain man, though he had a proper opinion of himself, based on an inside view of his private history.

He was aware that at sundry times he had come to the assistance of Miss Carter, and therefore believed she would naturally have some confidence in him.

Nevertheless, he had noted, or so imagined, that during their enforced companionship in the cell-like room they had just left, her confidence had apparently oozed away as the moments passed on.

In the first place, his coming had been welcomed as a stroke of Providence in her favor; but the feeling did not continue. The longer they remained there the less cordial were their relations, and before the unexpected exit had been made she had become cool as you please.

Mr. Smith was something of an adept in feminine ways, but for the life of him he could not explain this to his own satisfaction.

There were two reasons suggesting themselves; but they could not both be the true ones.

It might be—and here Mr. Smith almost blushed at his own colossal cheek—that the young lady was moved by maiden modesty from committing herself too unreservedly to the charge of a gentleman in whom she found herself growing unduly interested before making sure of his intentions.

The other was that in some way the seeds of doubt had been instilled into her mind. His appearance there might be misunderstood; or, even, she might believe he was not altogether innocent of a controlling hand in her affairs.

There was another explanation, which he put aside. Evidently, in some mys-

terious way, she had been deceived in the matter of her abduction. If so, it was possible that shame over the folly which had blinded her eyes might cause her to shrink into the background, while unreservedly allowing her welcome rescuer to take his own course.

The Ever Ready Sport was a little disgusted with himself for thinking of such things; and perhaps he was more disgusted when he noted that Miss Carmen gravitated naturally to the newcomer, as though her faith in him had vanished altogether.

She took Wayne Clymer's arm without hesitation, stepping along by his side without even casting a backward glance at the sport detective, who strode in the rear.

"Kind, of rough on yours truly," he thought, as he kept his place in the procession.

"Don't just remember to have said or done anything she could have taken offense at, and I guess it's only because he is such an utter stranger. If she knew he was the financial stay of Running Gear I might see another reason for it. As she don't, I can't give that as the cause why she takes to him like a duck to fresh water. Only way I can account for it is the natural cussedness of the sex; and at that I'll let it go."

Though Miss Carmen clung so confidently to the arm of the stranger, she certainly was not trying any female blandishments in that direction, for she never once opened her lips.

Neither did Cyclone Pete.

Clymer appeared to know the road; he did not. Having a revolver to fall back on, he simply kept along, and waited to see where they would come out.

The underground passage was not a long one, nor was it intricate.

The opening into the cell was a carefully concealed spot, but until the further end was reached it was simply an almost straight gash, broad enough to permit two to walk abreast, if they kept close; and a tall man had to stoop a trifle to avoid contact with the overhanging wall.

"We are not out of the woods, by a good deal," said Clymer, as they halted before a wall stretched across their path.

"Of course, I don't know what they may have outside, in the way of sentries, but the danger is not likely to meet us at once. It will be when we come to the actual outlet to this inter-mountain nook that the trouble will most likely begin."

"We ought to be good for half a dozen, especially as you seem to know something about the ins and outs of the road."

"Yes. It is lucky I spent a month in this region, prospecting, when I first came into the neighborhood of what is now called Running Gear. I made some strange discoveries then, which have stood me in good service to-day."

"How does the land lay just outside?"

"We have come out on a shelf some distance above the regular entrance to the cave—which, by the way, is one of the old cliff-dwellers' homes. Along that we can make our way for a distance, unperceived from below."

"After that, does it go up, or down?"

"Down for choice. I know nothing of any other route—though perhaps a dangerous one might be found, along which it would be possible to work one's way to the top of the cliff."

"Down it will be, then. Miss Carter is hardly equipped for mountain climbing. Then?"

"We come first to a narrow pass, no doubt guarded by sentinels, who, as there are prisoners at the stronghold, will be watching both ways. The inner one I think I can take care of, through my knowledge of the lay of the land. The other end I may leave for you to work. It is all dangerous, but nothing ventured nothing won."

"That's right. You can't win if you don't bet."

"No. I have heard something like that

before. It is hardly necessary to say that success depends on our giving no alarm. From the time we come out into the open air we must be silent as the grave. Is there anything to ask before I open the way?"

"Nothing here."

"And you will find that for once you have met with a woman who knows how to hold her tongue at an important moment," spoke Miss Carmen.

It was the first time she had taken part in the conversation; and as she spoke with a laugh, it indicated that her spirits were rising.

"Then, be silent, all."

By application of his strength in the right way and at the right spot, Clymer again opened the way, and the daylight streamed in on them.

The ledge was there, broad enough to allow them to proceed in a crouching posture without being seen from below. Without hesitation the advance was begun.

When they had gone some little distance all stopped suddenly, and huddled together.

From below there came up the sound of voices.

They listened; but, though here and there a word or two could be caught, it was impossible to learn the true meaning of what was going on, though it certainly did not seem to have any connection with them.

Smith was the first to drop to the level of the ledge and look cautiously over.

He was just in time to see the noose applied to the neck of Timothy McGonnigan.

The detective made a slight motion with his finger, and Clymer crept to his side.

It did not seem certain what was the meaning of what they saw. It looked like an execution; yet, from the conversation they witnessed rather than heard, it was possibly only an effort to force a confession from unwilling lips.

The sight puzzled the detective, and he watched with growing interest. Clymer, on the contrary, frowned heavily, and drew his revolver. As the rush of the outlaws pushed McGonnigan over the brink he threw up his hand and fired.

The shot came a shade late. It is possible if it had depended on the sport detective it would never have been taken.

By driving the outlaws to cover it destroyed the one single chance of the writhing man at the end of the rope.

For, strange as it might seem, the neck of the Irishman was not broken by the drop.

Death was certain to come in a brief lapse of time; but it would be death by strangulation.

No earthly chance was there for the three, crouching unobserved on the ledge above, to aid him, even had they so desired.

As for the outlaws, after that sharp reminder they would not be apt to come out from their shelter to assist the swinging man, whatever they might do to attack the party above.

"Blessed if I don't believe I made a mistake about him after all," muttered Smith, looking downward, and carefully measuring the distance and the course with his eye.

Then, there was another report; but it was not from the ledge, neither was it from the outlaws below. Glancing at the suspended McGonnigan, the Silk Hat Detective saw the squirming body suddenly take on a revolving motion, as though the rope might be slowly unraveling.

Again they heard the bark of a Winchester, followed by a cry from the hidden outlaws.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FORWARD IN LINE.

The second shot completed the work the first one had begun.

The rope suddenly snapped; and Timothy McGonnigan dropped.

An exclamation from Wayne Clymer

caused Smith to give a hasty side glance in his direction. He was staring at a spot in the circling wall of rock, where hung a faint little cloud of smoke. He had located the unknown marksman, who was visible from their higher point of vantage, though almost entirely hidden from the sight of the outlaws.

Doubtless Wayne had recognized the man; and the sport certainly did.

Crouched there in hiding, with the muzzle of his gun trained upward, waiting for some one to make an appearance, was Buck Barber.

"Bless my soul, but that's a delightful addition to the tea party."

Involuntarily Cyclone Pete clutched his revolver a little tighter as he spoke.

Whatever might be the meaning of the drama going on below, he felt that he and Buck would not be apt to face each other on friendly terms.

Meantime, had the shooting of Barber—which was certainly gilt-edged—come too late?

When the rope parted Timothy dropped out of sight.

How far he went was uncertain—it might be a dozen feet; it might be a hundred.

It seemed hardly possible he could have avoided serious injury, if he was still living, when he touched the rocks below.

Smith glanced at Clymer.

The banker was as much interested as he was; and more in doubt.

He was craning his neck over the ledge, even at the risk of being seen by the outlaws. Miss Carter had covered her face with her hands, and underneath them was silence.

"By heavens, he gets away, after all!"

It was the banker who made the exclamation.

He pointed swiftly with his finger, and at some distance from the place where he was supposed to have fallen McGonnigan was shuffling awkwardly along, in evident haste to pass what was a dangerous and uncovered path.

He did not seem to be hurt, but his foothold was precarious at places. Without descending to the level of the valley below, he was attempting to make his way directly to the niche in which Buck Barber was ensconced.

He had almost covered the distance over which he was visible, and Buck had turned his gaze from the rocks above to his partner.

It was only a momentary wandering, but it was at an unfortunate time.

The report of a Winchester from the entrance to the outlaws' hold roared over the valley and among the rocks, while Tim McGonnigan, throwing up his hands, toppled over, and once more dropped out of sight.

A sigh came simultaneously from the lips of the two men who were watching.

"That ends it," said Cyclone Pete, gloomily.

"There were worse fellows in the world than the red-headed Irishman, and if I could have seen the chance I would have chipped for him, even if his pard had taken a snap shot at me the next second. That will occupy their attention here for a little, and give us a chance; but I am afraid it will put the outlooks on their guard, and it will come to a square fight if we want to get away."

"Perhaps—but we will be able for them if we can keep ahead of these. Come on."

Miss Carmen had closed her eyes to the sights; but she was none the less ready to obey, now the order came to advance.

She even motioned away Clymer's arm when it was offered to her, preferring to make her way unaided.

The valley by which the entrance to the cave was reached was nearly circular in shape, with sides high, and almost precipitous. Fortunately, they did not have far to go, or their change in position would have brought them into view of the outlaws.

Their progress was slow, for it was important to avoid displacing a loose stone, or making a slip, or unguarded exclamation, which might give any alarm.

Nevertheless, it did not take them long to come to the narrow pass which led to the outer world.

Here, Clymer held up his hands as he whispered:

"Be more careful than ever, and keep a little further in the rear. I know the lay of the land exactly, and it is here I must get in my work."

"They are getting in theirs," replied Smith, in the lowest of tones, with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder, in the direction whence they had come.

In rapid succession, three or four rifle reports blended with the rattle of revolvers. Buck Barber was putting up a fight on his own account, now; and without a doubt the bandits on the rocks would make it warm for him.

Clymer did not hesitate.

"That is Barber's lookout, not ours. The safety of this young lady is the first thing to think of, and he must take his own chances."

"Be hanged if it don't go against the grain. Get a move on, and if we can once see daylight ahead for her, I'll take a hand in, if Buck cuts loose at me the next minute. I can't leave him there to be slaughtered."

"Don't you trouble yourself about him. If any man can take care of himself, Buck is that individual. Now, steady, and I'll take a look at the land."

The banker turned away without another glance toward the spot where the conflict was still going on, and crept forward.

From time to time he looked around him, to make sure of his location, or gave a warning gesture, to keep the two well in his rear.

At length he paused and peered cautiously over into the gorge.

Unless some one was at the moment looking at that exact spot, it was not likely he was seen, for his observations lasted only for an instant.

He drew his head back, and glanced around.

Smith, who was watching anxiously, uncertain whether a matter of such importance should be entrusted to hands which might not be any too thoroughly experienced, expected him to loosen his revolver, but he did nothing of the kind.

It was a more noiseless if not so accurate a weapon he intended to employ.

From half a dozen that were conveniently near, he selected a rock that weighed perhaps twenty pounds, and once more crept to the edge.

This time he was bolder in his actions.

He looked over into the gulch, as though careless of being seen, and raised the stone with both hands, holding it poised for a few seconds.

Then he suddenly dashed it downward.

From below came up the "chug" of the striking rock, followed, as it seemed, by one low moan.

After that, all was still.

With his hand on his revolver, Clymer crouched back and listened, but the Ever Ready Sport sprang to his feet and looked over into the chasm. If this blow had failed he wanted to know it at once.

Evidently, there had been no failure.

Stretched out at full length, utterly motionless, he could see the body of a man, who had doubtless been placed there as a sentinel, and who had been stricken down without ever knowing what had hit him.

Clymer did not care to look himself, and the detective understood the reason why. The sight he might meet would possibly be one to haunt his dreams hereafter.

Clymer beckoned, and moved off. As he moved he muttered:

"There must be no delay. If they take us now we are lost. The outside sentinel is your task, if you accept it. It is likely to be a fair fight in an open field."

CHAPTER XXV.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

The pass was longer than Cyclone Pete had anticipated, and the path which they had been traveling stopped before the outer end was reached.

It was possible to scramble down here, and fortunately the way, such as it was, did not bring them in sight of the outpost.

At some sacrifice to shoe leather, and a great deal to dignity, Carmen went with the others.

"Around this bend we will come upon the sentinels. So, at least, I believe," said the banker.

"Just where, of course, I am unable to say, and it is for that reason I am willing you should take the lead. I am willing enough to risk my life if it is necessary, but I have more confidence in your skill, when it comes to a snap shot, than I have in my own. It will be a march in the open; and whichever is discovered first will most likely go down. If you think I am taking an advantage in the matter, say the word, and I will lead the way. But Miss Carter must wait until it is over. She must not run the risks of a chance bullet, fired in this direction."

"This is one of the times, I reckon, when killing will be no murder. The other fellow has the chances, but—you have never seen me shoot."

"If you can get within pistol range I have no fears; but, remember, the sentinel has a rifle. Now go. If you succeed, have no thought for us, but look out for your own safety. We will take care of ours."

It did not seem at all out of the way that the matter should be thus arranged. It was to be a duel to the death; and the escape of the others was depending on the prowess of the Silk Hat Detective. It was his place, rather than the banker's, to clear the way, and with a shake of the hand, offered to him in parting, he stealthily moved around the wall of rock which concealed what had been beyond. Before taking another step he looked to see if the sentinel was in sight.

He was there. In fact, there were two of him.

What was worse, one was looking exactly in that direction, and seemed to catch sight of Philadelphia Smith as soon as the latter caught sight of him.

Without an instant's delay all three dropped to the ground; the two outlaws throwing forward their rifles, while the sport detective brought his revolver to a ready.

"Two against one, and they no doubt dead shots," thought the sport, clutching his revolver a little tighter, as though it could aid him if it would.

"If they are dead shots, it's a fair guess I'll pass in my checks. Wonder if a prudent man wouldn't take the back track."

He never looked around, however.

If he had wanted to retreat he would have slowly made his way backward, for he knew that his best chance was to hug the ground, and trust to the outlaws firing high.

If they would only rush forward within decent range he would be willing enough to stay where he was. What he feared was that they would coolly blaze away at long range until they had finished the work.

There was a little puff of smoke and the zip of a bullet overhead.

Not a very wide margin; but, a miss is as good as a mile. He was not yet certain about his best course. Should he lie still; should he creep forward or back; should he up and make a rush?

Never before had he felt so uncertain in an emergency.

Ten yards nearer, and they would be barely in range of a chance shot, though still too far away for certain marksmanship.

He quietly took aim, elevating the muzzle of his revolver till it seemed to point yards above the head of the late marks-

man, who at that moment fired another shot.

Simultaneously with the report of the rifle came the bark of Smith's pistol.

It was not a random shot; but it was made without much hope. If it could hit it would, but, not knowing the weapon, and not certain of the cartridges, he would have been perfectly satisfied if he could have sent the bullet near enough to make the man dodge.

As for himself, he had his own course marked out.

As he pulled the trigger he cast the revolver up into the air, gave a yell and a spring; and then lay kicking convulsively, like one at his last gasp.

Yet his face was all the time toward the sentinels, and what was his surprise to see the barrel of the Winchester sway a little, then thump to the ground, as the hands holding it relaxed.

"Great ginger!" he exclaimed. "There's a pair of us! Is he playing the same game?"

If it was a game, it was certainly cleverly managed on both sides.

Though Cyclone Pete knew time might be precious, and the shots, if they were heard at headquarters, might bring upon Miss Carter and Wayne Clymer an overwhelming force, he threw away no chance. After what might pass for a last, expiring kick, he stretched himself out straight and stiff, and waited for the next move.

The outlaw who, as yet, had not used his rifle, was every bit as cautious.

He gave an anxious look at his companion, and crawled nearer—though he lay at no great distance.

"That settles it," thought Smith, as he saw the fellow place himself behind the body of his comrade, making of it a partial breastwork.

Across the shoulders of the motionless body he thrust his rifle, and took long and careful aim.

It was a nerve-trying situation. Smith could hardly expect to be able to repeat that one fortunate shot, and his ruse had not entirely convinced the remaining foe, who evidently intended to make sure before allowing himself to be taken at a disadvantage.

Little good would the sport's ruse do him if he unmasked at the threat.

"If he hits, I'll simply kick the bucket and go under. If he misses, I'll up and charge him while he is all abroad with surprise. But if Clymer is half as good a man as I thought he was I don't see why he don't take a hand in, now he knows there is no chance for a surprise."

It seemed a terribly long time he had to wait while the outlaw was deciding on his aim. In reality it was but a few seconds.

When the shot did come there was a double surprise.

Up from the ground sprang the man who had seemed dead, and straight for the marksman he darted, firing as he came.

He could afford to waste a few shots, if by so doing he could put his man into a temporary flurry.

Once fairly within range with his weapon, and Philadelphia Smith would be willing to trust to his revolver against the rifle; and ask for but one shot in the cylinder, too.

He had plenty more cartridges in his belt, and when he had disposed of this fellow it would not take long to recharge his six-shooter.

The charge did confuse the man, for he fired one shot, wildly.

But it did more than that, for it brought the dead to life. As Smith had suspected, he had only been playing 'possum, and now got down to work again.

Though the chances were two to one against him, the detective never wavered. A few yards would bring him on as even terms as he dared ask, and in a hand-to-hand fight, though it was two to one, he was willing to accept the risks.

But that one shot, which went wide, was the last.

There was another hand in the game. He heard an unearthly yell, and a man came plunging forward, firing at the road-agents as he came; and they, seized with a sudden panic, fairly turned and fled.

Two horses were tethered a little further on; and it was toward these they directed their flight. Whether either of them was really hit Smith could not determine; but they mounted their steeds with a haste which hardly gave them time to unloose them before mounting.

The retreat was all managed in a moment. The two horsemen waited for nothing; and darting away, struck out for the open ground beyond the pass. Behind them raced the stranger assailant.

"Just as well, just as well," thought the relieved sport, looking after them.

"I don't know who the gentleman is, but he seems very much in earnest. I hope he will keep them going. Meantime, I'll see what has become of brother Clymer. It is time he was appearing on the carpet. Perhaps they have him corralled again."

He did not turn at once, but, as he watched the disappearing three, whistled softly, and then gave a low call.

There was no answer, and he began to be anxious.

The banker he was very willing to drop, but Miss Carmen was with him, and it was her possible danger which made him uneasy. He took the back track, advancing cautiously till he had reached the spot where he had parted from the two.

Neither of them was anywhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XXVI

SKIPPED BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON.

"He's a gentleman and a scholar, and if I had him in reach I'd take him over my knee, same as I did Buck Barker."

That was the first thought of the Silk Hat Detective when he found the banker missing and the young lady nowhere to be seen.

He was in the habit himself of staying with a pard until the bitter end, if need be, and desertion such as this had never entered his thoughts.

"The agents can't have come down and scooped them, or I would have heard something of the riot. He must have lost his nerve and quit by some other route. Blame it, I don't blame him so much, but he might have given me the same chance. Instead of that he sent me out to cover his retreat, and never told me the way to follow if I had to fall back. Confound it, that's the way it always happens when there is a woman in the case."

He could make some excuse for Wayne Clymer when he thought of Carmen; and would have been willing enough to bear the whole brunt of the fray if he had only received fair notice.

What angered him was that he should have been deliberately sacrificed without warning.

A moment's reflection, however, brought to his mind the parting words of the banker.

Though he had not understood it then, he really had fair notice that each was to shift for himself. He thought the matter over for a few seconds.

It seemed likely that when the shooting began Clymer had become convinced the way out could not be forced, and that Smith would receive the worst end of the bargain.

The noise of the conflict would call attention in that direction. As all was now quiet in the valley, the road-agents had probably forever silenced Buck Barber, and would be at liberty to turn their attention thitherward.

"It is two to one he has harked back to the cave, and that I could find him where he found me. But do I want to go there? Like as not he only intends to hide until the storm blows over; and

knows if I am taken I will be true blue, and never give a hint of what I would naturally suspect. I can do no good there—I had better wait for him here. And meantime, it would not be a bad idea to see what has become of Buck Barber."

He knew well enough the danger there would be in attempting to reconnoitre in broad daylight; but the nearer he got to the cave, in the valley below its mouth, the less his appearance here would be expected. Up to the present time there was no evidence that the escape from the prison cell was known, and until the sentinels gave in a report any alarm at the shooting in the pass—if it had been heard—would cause search to be made from the outer rather than the inner end.

Reasoning in this way, and having a large stock of courage of his own, Smith lingered no longer, but coolly proceeded to make his way into the valley.

Of course, every move was made with caution, and he was ready at any moment to drop and shoot.

When he came to the spot where Clymer had dropped the rock upon the inner sentinel, he was surprised to find no trace of the man.

More than that; there was not a drop of blood to show he had been injured.

"That's all right. He'll go back and report being hit by a thunderbolt, and his pards will put two and two together, and swear we are well out of the mix. Wish I knew who the fellow was who made the scatterment outside. My game would have been to follow him, but it's too late now. A fellow never knows everything at the right time."

Of course, if Buck had received the worst of it in the argument, and had been disabled or slain, it was likely the outlaws would examine the body, if it was only for the sake of rifling it.

If, however, as was possible, Buck had remained secure in his intrenchment, it was possible for Smith to hug the wall below the cave without much danger of meeting any one or of being seen.

He determined to advance; and in spite of what had passed between them, give any aid he might to the tough proprietor of the All Right.

As for McGonnigan, he had little hope that he was still alive.

Carefully he made his way along until he had come, as he believed, underneath the spot from which he had watched the hanging of the Irishman.

Everything was silent, and he could not see a soul. Surely, there was something strange about this.

With his revolver in his hand he crept on, keeping a sharper lookout than ever, and, though he was running great risks, he hardly expected to be caught entirely off his guard. When he suddenly heard a shout he dropped so quickly that he was under cover behind a boulder almost before a shot could have reached him.

"Han's up, you thar!" was the cry; and he recognized the voice of Buck Barber.

The hail came from behind cover, but it was in an unexpected direction, showing the lurker had shifted his position.

Was it to be peace or war? And where were the outlaws?

"Easy, old man!" answered the sport.

"There's no chance here for foolishness; everything has got to be good, solid business. If you say we must shoot it out well and good. But if you're a wise man you'll drop our private little racket and attend to something a heap sight more important. What do you say, man? Fla of truce while we fight the common enemy?"

It was not worth while, now, to attempt concealment.

If there were any of the Goldbugs with in hearing distance they had already been warned of his presence.

And after what he had seen he did not believe he made any mistake in considering the tough proprietor of the All Right as an enemy of the Goldbugs.

When the answer came it was in a totally different voice from the one expected.

"Arrah, now, be aizy, me bye, an' come over wid us till we talk dhe matther over. It's no bad blood Tim McGonnigan wad carry for a poult on dhe head. It's too monny he's given himsilf, afther dhe same fas'ion, an' Buck, here, will be afther list'ain' to rayson."

"There waz a slight mistake made, and that's a fact. You fellows keep a watch on 'em up above, and I'll come fast enough. Then, if we three get together, and can't clean out the nest, we ought to be cleaned out ourselves."

Without hesitation Smith leaped to his feet, and hastily stepped off toward the voices.

"Sure, an' Oi have me doubts whether they are there anny longer, at all, at all. We kin say nothin' av thim, at laste."

In a moment more Cyclone Pete was in the niche alongside of the two men, who received him fairly well, though Buck evidently had not got over his dislike.

"Now, then, Tim, you can keep your own counsel, if you want, but if it's not a secret, I'd like to know how you came to be mixed up with such a gang. I'll swear you were never a regular member."

"Sure, an' it wor afther coin Oi wor. It's me own belafe the spalpeens have a moine av their own, an' it wor to foind it Oi risked me loife. But whin Oi saw the faymale in dishtriss Oi forgot it all, an' whin she mishondershtood me m'an-in' Oi wint near to passin' over dhe range. Me pard foll'ed me here, an' chipped in whin Oi wor at dhe last gasp."

"I understand all that last part of it, and I guess the first part is not more than a million miles off the truth. What are we going to do now?"

"Sure, an' Oi think it's skipped they have, an' av yer game to try thim a whirl we'll climb up an' say. Buck an' Oi wor about to go it alone."

"Man alive, they must be up there somewhere. There is no way they could have got out without passing me."

"Don't yer bet too high on that," interrupted Buck.

"An' I'm only hoping they ain't. Ef we kin git whar we can reach 'em wunst, they'll never want ter hang another pard ov mine."

"All right. If they have gone we may find Clymer and the young lady, and I'm more concerned about that."

"More loike they've got her ag'in, an' tuk her wid thim."

Of course, the move was made with caution, but it turned out as Buck had predicted.

The tough had held them off so stoutly with his Winchester that they had abandoned the attack, and had withdrawn from the cave itself by some way which the three could not discover.

What was more perplexing to the sport was the fact that he discovered no traces of the banker and the young lady.

Had they made their escape; were they in safe hiding; or, were they again the captives of the outlaws?

It seemed as though it would require a trip to Running Gear to make sure of the answer to at least one of these questions.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A PAIR OF PROWLERS.

There seemed but one way out of the cul de sac, so far as the three could see, and that was by the pass. It was the route by which all of them had entered; and two of them, at least, would have little trouble in finding the road thence to Running Gear.

"Ett's clear thar's no chance ter find ther gal hyer; an' fur ther rest ov 'em, I cain't say I'm anxshus. They're a blamed sight more likely ter find us—an' when we wa'rn't a lookin'. You galoots kin snoop round ef yer likes, but I'm back fur ther burg."

So Buck announced when their search

seemed useless, and he turned his face toward the outer world without waiting for objection or answer.

Smith had already informed them of his adventures, and of the man who came to his help, so that Barber and McGonnigan knew there was a possibility of meeting some of the outlaws, even if the whole gang had not, in some unexplained manner, gone in that direction. With this in mind the three trudged along, constantly on the alert.

In that way it happened they discovered a trail, some half an hour later, which evidently led further into the hills; and caught a glimpse of a little party just as it was dropping out of sight at the entrance to what seemed to be a gorge.

Tim saw the outfit first, and halted his companions.

"Be me sowl, it's the leddy; an' Tim McGonnigan wor niver known to desert dhe fair six whin they wor in thrubble. Are ye wid me?"

"Don't be a blamed fool, Tim. How yer think we're goin' ter follow 'em ter do good, an' we on foot?" replied Buck.

"It's camp they will for dhe noight, an' it's McGonnigan will foinde thim."

"Count me in on that platform," said Smith, cheerfully.

"It's time something was done in this matter, and we are about the gentlemen for the occasion. Three to six, or three to a dozen—it makes little difference. We are able for them all if we can meet them with an even start. That last is all I'm asking; and if we go slow we're bound to get it."

Buck hesitated.

Up to the present time his antipathy to the sport had only showed itself by an occasional scowl. They were not in condition to take up their quarrel, and the chances had been they could journey together to the town quite amicably.

This was a different thing; and yet, the frankness with which Smith acceded to the proposition had its effect. Buck spoke with sudden explosiveness:

"Blast ett all, yer knows I don't like yer, an' thet Tim an' me ain't yer style, but ef you kin trust us we ain't afared you'll throw off. Sail in. I'm on ther dead level."

"That's white, and the way I like to hear it. Boss the outfit, Timothy. As long as you can show the right colors I'd as soon train under you as any other man; and there are worse fellows in the world than Buck, here, as I remarked to Clymer."

"Blast Clymer! He's all fur hisself, an' I wouldn't squeal ef ther agents kept him. It's ther calico I'm after. Tim an' me'll stand by a woman tell ther last horn blows, ef we be tough."

"For this campaign," said Smith, offering his hand. "After that, if you choose, you can pick your flint and try it again, though I tell you honest I carry too many guns for you."

Buck hesitated once more, but it was only for an instant.

"Perhaps yer does," he said, gruffly, dropping his palm on that of the sport; and so the truce was made.

Of what had happened they could only guess.

Unless their eyes deceived them, Miss Carter was once more in the hands of the agents. They saw the flutter of a dress for an instant, but at the distance it was impossible to recognize the banker, if he was one of the party.

What had been the result of the flight of the sentinels was also mere guesswork; though, judging from the size of the party seen, they had most probably rejoined the main body. As for the silent assailant, he was nowhere to be seen.

Of course, the ground was strange to the sport; but it did not seem altogether unfamiliar to Barker, who, after all, was in the lead.

Now and then he suggested a cut-off, and the result was that every time they struck the trail again; and from indications that were to be observed they were losing no ground.

Nothing showed pursuit was suspected; and as the retreat was leisurely made, the result was as the Irishman had predicted.

When a place was reached that suited their purpose, the outlaws made a halt.

If Buck had not been on the alert they might have discovered him, as he led the way on one of his cut-offs; but fortunately he was ready to find the spot occupied, and scented the danger from afar. He threw up his hand in warning to his companions, and pointed:

"Down thar's yer meat. Ef they don't starve us out, we kin hev a chance at 'em when ther dark comes down. We'll hev ter be right shy, but ett looks ter me ez though we war goin' ter hev 'em."

Neither of the three was actually suffering, for Barber had a haversack along; but rations were short enough to make the time of waiting anything but pleasant; while it was not possible to get nearer to the camp by daylight without running great risk.

When twilight came down, and the shadows were deep around the camp of the outlaws, there was a whispered consultation between the three, and Smith thought it was time to find out something more definite in regard to the camp below them. He offered to explore, guaranteeing he would do it cautiously.

No one objected, and he crept out on his mission, to determine how many they had against them, and whether it was worth while to run the risk of a night attack. If Carmen was a captive, as he firmly believed, though the odds were ever so great, he did not intend to let the night pass without an honest effort for her rescue.

There had been no mistake, as he soon discovered.

Both the banker and the young lady were there. They appeared to take their recapture in as good spirits as could possibly be expected, and it looked likely the banker had come to some arrangement, from the free and easy way he was treated. Though sentinels guarded the camp, Clymer's movements therein were not watched, and he was conversing in a low tone with his fellow-captive.

"Looks as though he was going to buy himself and the lady off," thought the sport, as he watched from a secure hiding place.

"It's dead certain they don't intend to trust him to go in to make arrangements for the boodle, but he can fix that all right enough if there is coin enough in his bank. The young lady don't seem quite so hopeful, but that goes without saying. Wonder if he would thank us if we tried to save him, say, ten thousand dollars, which ought to be about their figure. That's a question worth considering. They will fight hard for the sum, and there will be a risk about it that perhaps we ought not to force on the lady."

When he crept back he found his allies of much the same opinion; yet, they decided to keep watch for the time being, and if no opportunity was found during the night to aid the captives, in the morning one of them, at least, would go back to Running Gear and get help, either to rescue the prisoners outright, or make an attack on the outlaws as soon as they had been set free.

It was not altogether a safe position for them to occupy, should their presence once be suspected, but unless it was there would not be much danger of the Goldbugs stumbling upon them in the darkness. They divided the night into watches, one of them guarding their own camp and keeping a watch on the movements of the bandits as well.

It fell to the lot of Cyclone Pete to keep guard for some hours after midnight, and again he crept forward to take a view of the camp beneath them.

All seemed to be silent and perhaps asleep.

The carefully hidden fire had burned low, and he did not hear a sound to indicate any one was awake.

After a time, however, it seemed to

him a shadow moved near the spot where he had seen Clymer and Miss Carter, when previously viewing the camp. There was no sound of footfalls, yet he believed it betokened danger to the banker or his companion, and he was instantly on the alert. He leaned forward, wondering what was to come next, and half thinking, finally, that he heard a smothered cry.

The cry, if cry it was, was not repeated, and he could see no more of the shadow. For a little he was almost willing to believe he had been deceived.

Yet, a little later, as he fell back, with an inaudible sigh, when the tension at which he had held his nerves was relieved, the detective saw the shadow again, and at some distance from the spot where he had located it before.

Was it the same shadow, though?

The outlines were strangely blurred and distorted, as it seemed to stagger out of sight. What was the meaning of it?

Was it a prowler like himself; or was it Clymer, making his escape? The man with the plug hat determined to see, even if it took him dangerously close to the camp below.

He stole along, however, without running as much risk of discovery as he had imagined. Though the open spot before him was lighted up by the moonlight, there was a dark belt of shade through which he crept, and to his surprise it led him past the camp, and into a recess beyond, from which a practicable path stretched away. Unless it was guarded he fancied that he himself would make little bones about trying it had he been in the banker's situation; and he had but scant doubt he would find Clymer somewhere beyond. The only question which worried him was, had he taken Miss Carter with him?

He dared not run the risk of entering the actual limits of the camp to find out, and decided to push on. If he had made a mistake, and happened to meet an outlaw instead of Clymer, he was ready for the emergency.

For perhaps five minutes he followed the path.

Then, he heard something which caused him instantly to be on the alert. There was a noise as though of a struggle; and after a bit a voice which he believed he recognized, though the words came as though from throat with a grip upon it.

"Hands off, curse you!" the voice said.

"Fair play and I'll fight you to the death!"

It was Wayne Clymer speaking, beyond a doubt. In his retreat he had been surprised by an outlaw.

That was the thought of the sport, and he rushed forward as silently as he could to throw himself upon the two struggling men.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CLOSE CALL.

A few steps further and Cyclone Pete came upon them.

Yet, just before he reached them, a tiny flame shot up. The one man had so far conquered the other that he held him by one hand and knee, while with the other hand he struck a match and held it up, so that the faces of both were revealed to each other, as well as to the sport.

The upper man threw down the match and drew a knife, just as Smith leaped upon him. In the under one he had recognized the abducted banker, and in the other the unknown man who twice at least had attacked him.

Philadelphia Smith was not a large man, according to appearance, but when he hit out the blow conveyed the impression that he weighed a ton.

Whatever was the meaning of this scene he had happened upon, it was no place to use firearms, and so he sent out his fist with a good will that could hardly have been bettered. He both felt and heard the man go crashing down, and

had a shrewd idea it was a knockout blow.

Without stopping to see, he bent over the banker, who was gasping for breath after a fashion which showed he was powerless to rise for the present.

At the same moment Smith heard the rustle of skirts, and the voice of Carmen Carter, sunk to a whisper.

"Is he dead? Tell me that he is no dead?"

"Not by a good deal, though he had a close call, and that's a fact. Keep silent. That fellow may come to life again, and we want to get out of the way before he can give the alarm. Follow me."

He had no idea whatever where the narrow path led to, but it was the only one for him to follow, while it was madness to think of lingering there.

He stooped down and raised Clymer from the ground.

The banker hung limply over his arm, and another moment of that pressure upon the windpipe would have settled the question of life or death against him.

Miss Carter hesitated, and the man with the plug hat noticed it.

It was no time, however, to argue, and he thought he grasped the situation better than a woman would do.

Time enough to resuscitate his burden when they had moved some little distance from this dangerous neighborhood.

"Not a word," he said, sternly. "It is the last chance for both him and you, and delay will only throw away three lives. Follow, and I can, I think, assure your safety."

So far there was no sign of alarm in the camp beyond, and though uncertain of the trail, Smith believed that if he was not mistaken in the lay of the land he could find his way back to the neighborhood of his own camp. If he could once join forces with the Irishman and his pard, he felt sure the four could stand off the entire force of outlaws, and make good a retreat to Running Gear.

It was a heavy contract he was undertaking, in case his burden continued helpless; but he did not believe there was much danger of that.

The great thing was to get him out of hearing before any unguarded utterances might alarm the neighboring camp.

The man he had struck remained motionless where he had fallen, but there was still life in him. There was no time to bind him, and as there was a likelihood of the absence of the prisoners being detected at any moment, it was scarcely worth while.

At the outset good progress was made; and though once or twice the Silk Hat Detective stopped momentarily to shift his load, he never showed signs of exhaustion; while Miss Carter kept by his side, for the most part in moody silence.

Now and then she leaned forward and touched the banker lightly on the face; and it was she who first discovered he was recovering from the swoon into which he had fallen.

For, after all, it seemed more like a faint, than an unconsciousness caused by the choking he had received.

At a word from her Smith put his burden down.

They had reached a point where their voices could not alarm the camp; and the spot was well adapted for defense from the direction whence they had come. The path was narrow, and they stood upon the crown of a sharp incline.

Drawing a flask from his pocket, he carefully used some of its contents. In a moment Clymer gasped and straightened himself up.

It was well the Ever Ready Sport had an eye keen as a hawk, and that he always looked straight at the man with whom he dealt.

Clymer's hand flew out, and it clasped a revolver, which was leveled directly at the very man who had risked everything to save him.

Swift as was the motion, the action of Smith was swifter.

His right hand trust out in a simul-

taneous movement, to cover that of the banker, while his second finger slid under the self-acting hammer which had already raised for a fall.

In a second more there would have been a report to alarm; and most likely a shot to slay.

"Great Scott! What's the matter with you? Don't you know your solid friend; or, must I knock you down to prove how I love you. Let up, man. You are safe now; and as soon as you get your second wind we will go on toward Running Gear. But if I hadn't taken a hand without asking for cards, I reckon you would have been over the range by this."

"Where—where am I? Where is—is—the—lady?"

"Right here where you are. I steered you both through the worst of the rifle, but there's no time to waste, even here. When you get your wind again, and take another nip at the great invigorator, we will get a move on that will take us out of danger. We can give further particulars as we go along."

Clymer's nervous tension relaxed, and the hand holding the pistol drooped away from the one of Smith's which had been holding it.

"Better luck than I expected," he mumbled.

"I thought—I thought—those fiends were going to murder me; and I knew then they would not give Miss—Miss Carmen fair play."

"That was about the size of it, I reckon, though I didn't just understand how the game was being run, or why you had deserted your fellow-prisoner."

"I—I was forced to sign a check for our ransom; and she and I agreed, as it was hopeless for both of us to try to escape, that I should at least make the effort, and see that her release was made certain. I must have been met by a sentinel. I do not understand anything beyond."

Clymer still spoke with hesitation, and it was plain he had not recovered from the effects of the choking received in that struggle, the particulars of which were almost a blank.

But his explanation, such as it was, seemed to clear things up to the other.

"If you have sent in a check they think is going to be cashed, I guess they didn't have any more use for you. One thing was sure. The individual who met you meant straight business, with a great big knife. That's all right now. I've got a couple of pards somewhere down there, and if we can get to them I wouldn't mind taking a fly at the whole outfit, now Miss Carter is out of the way of stray shots. You didn't hear anything of her brother, did you?"

"Hush!" the banker replied, under his breath.

"Of that by and by."

There could be no mistaking the meaning of the warning.

Carmen, wearied with her journey, crouched listlessly a few steps away, and the words could not reach her ears, but a longer explanation in the same tone might arouse her suspicions. Smith understood the worst, and changed the subject.

"Enough of that. Can you stagger on now? You will gain strength as you go, and if the young lady gets to thinking I am afraid she will collapse altogether. I don't want to have two moribunds on my hands at the same time."

"I am not dying; and they haven't heard the last of me, by a long sight. They have made it war, and war it will be, after this, to the bitter end. Come on."

He started up, and catching Carmen by the hand, surged away, almost forgetting the man who was talking to him. He shook his fist in anger, and muttered in a tone so low it could only be heard by Carmen and himself.

Even blind anger was better than the helplessness of a few moments before. The sport detective dropped a few paces in the rear, where he could watch the

two, and at the same time guard against danger from the rear, which was the only quarter from which for the present he anticipated it.

Doggedly the banker kept on his course, with Cyclone Pete striding on behind, and still there were no signs of pursuit. It began to seem possible that either the alarm had not been given or pursuit had been made in the wrong direction.

As yet there had hardly been a possibility of altering their course, and Clymer was leading the way as nearly toward the spot where Buck Barber and his pard could be looked for, as Smith himself could have done. Had there been any attempt to turn aside he might have spoken, but so long as he had nothing better to suggest the man with the plug hat kept mum.

One thing he did see, though the shadows were deep, and the night all the darker on account of the near approach of the dawn.

While the banker began to regain strength and courage with every step, Miss Carter wearied more and more with the march, and leaned more heavily upon Clymer, whose arm was around her waist as she stumbled on.

Suddenly they halted.

Even to the Silk Hat Detective the place began to have a somewhat natural look; and he fancied the banker must have caught a glimpse of the camp for which he was searching. If so, it might be best for him to take the lead, and prepare his two companions, who might not understand his late desertion, or the new condition of affairs.

He moved up toward Wayne; but before reaching his side there arose a sudden uproar. Out on the darkness flamed shots and rolled shouts. The camp had been attacked, and the outlaws had not found it unprepared.

It was only for a moment that the banker remained motionless.

Then he sprang forward, a revolver in his hand, the detective close behind.

They were nearer to the camp than the latter had thought. Almost immediately he could see in their front a man who, partially sheltered by a bowlder, was firing deliberately toward the flashes from beyond.

This man was Tim McGonnigan. Hardly had he been recognized when Wayne Clymer's hand rose, and held in line for the figure but a few yards away.

There was no time for explanation, and just as the shot flashed out Philadelphia Smith threw his arms around the body of the banker and bore him to the ground.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CARMEN CARTER'S DANGER.

"Sure, an' Oi s'ane teir darruk forrums crapein' forninst dhe camp, an' Oi knew it wor for no good, so Oi lit dhroive. Whin Oi dishkivered it wor for blood Oi shot for kapes, an' Buck wor not backward. Afther that it wor plain sailin', an' soon they fell back. Thin, Oi had toime to say phat it wor you wor afther; an' a very nate toime yez wor havin' av it."

That was the way Timothy explained the situation when he had torn the two men apart after the fracas had ceased, suddenly as it had broken out.

The bullet from the pistol of the banker whistled harmlessly over the head of the Irishman, but at first he had been inclined to reject the explanation of Cyclone Pete, that it was all a mistake.

Buck, standing a little further on, paid no attention to them.

He evidently thought his pard could take care of himself, and was watching to see the outlaws did not renew the attack.

As for Clymer—he had begun to be used to rough handling, and, though he had made a desperate fight when the terms of the sport first closed around him, yet he accepted the situation, even if it was in a somewhat sullen manner.

"All right, all right," he said, with a laugh which sounded a trifle hollow.

"I supposed they had headed us off—as undoubtedly they had—and pulled on the nearest figure I saw. When the bullets began to whistle I was not standing much on ceremony. Call it square. If I did not have a chance at the agents, I had a very rough deal, anyhow. Poor Miss Carter has fared even worse, for she seems to be almost dead from exhaustion and fright."

It was an actual fact that Philadelphia Smith was not paying as much attention to that young lady as he had thought he would.

He knew well enough the banker had given his heart, or at least his fancy, to Tamar Templeton, and had not done more for Carmen than any gentleman would be apt to do under the circumstances.

He did not think that he himself was inclined to jealousy, or that he was enough interested to be jealous.

But the very evident preference of the young lady for Clymer, who appeared to be a still greater stranger than himself, had given his pride a shock, and without knowing it he was showing and feeling a good deal of silent resentment.

He looked at her carelessly, and it did not seem she was more exhausted than she had been.

"She has had a rough deal, and that is a fact, but after this things will go smoother. I suspect we have seen the last of the outlaws for the present, even though I would not altogether object to another interview by daylight. The walking is not exactly the best in the world, and if we could find a chance to capture a horse for the accommodation of the young lady, it would be an advantage."

"We must do something of the kind, if I have to make a foray on their camp, alone and single handed. She never can stand the tramp, and we must not delay in getting back to Running Gear."

"I've been making that remark quite numerously, but somehow something has always been arising. If nothing better offers, we can make a litter and carry her. In a good cause I'll agree to play both ends against the middle and carry your side, if you're not equal to the emergency. You have had about as rough a time yourself, and I wouldn't blame you if you were night to petered out."

"What do you take me for? I'll engage to stay with the rest of you, and perhaps the lady can stay longer than we think."

"Sure, an' we won't lave till daloight, an' be that toime she will have had some little chance to rist. Kape yer own oyes p'aled. It's more throuble Oi'm afther lookin' for."

"If Smith has the courage to try his suggestion, there is time enough to reconnoitre, and if horses are handy, to make the effort. I wouldn't mind a brush with the scoundrels. After this it will be war to the knife between us, and I don't care how soon the campaign opens."

There was a half-hidden sneer in the banker's voice which the Silk Hat Detective could not fail to notice, and he answered promptly:

"I'm not counting on doing much running now there's a fair opening for a ten strike, and if you cant to cast around for a little fun I'm with you. Two of us, if we are both good men, ought to be able to take the dozen—do you want to try it?"

"Perhaps the odds are a little too big; but, if Timothy, there, will take the third of the contract, I'll answer for my share, and we'll beard the lion in his den. Several lions, in fact. And I'll offer one thousand dollars, to be divided between you two, if we can take Captain Goldbug back to Running Gear."

"Phot's dhe matther wid me pard, Buck? Sure an' Oi have all dhe expirimentin' wid dhe bastes me heart could wish for, an' wan av us must shtay wid dhe liddy."

Smith hardly thought the Irishman would show the white feather, and this shifting the offer on the shoulders of Buck Barber was a surprise. For himself, he was ready to accept the banter, for he had already made up his mind there would be a little further friction with the outlaws before they could get fairly out of these recesses, and he preferred to be attacking, rather than attacked.

"All right, Timothy, we'll take Buck in your place, and go down. But you're the first son of the Emerald I ever knew to decline his share in a row. If pass in our chips, see we are buried decently."

"Och! It's me own thought that av yez lave me here it's more loike Oi will have dhe hot ind av dhe ruction, an' you'll have dhe contrhact av plantin' dhe ither fell'ys. Dhrove on wid yer gocart, yez can't l'ade Tim McGonnigan into dhe thrap."

Buck had listened in silence to the bantering, but he spoke up with a snort of disgust:

"W'ot yer givin' us, Tim? They won't hev quit runnin' this side ov ther divide. We'll make sure ov it, though, an' be back afore yer know we're gone. I'll go yer two ter one, an' take sheers in ther All Right, that ef yer brings ther woman along she won't see powder burned."

"Och, yez kin sail in, it's your funeral," answered Tim, with a shrug of the shoulders, as he turned away. Whatever was his true reason, he evidently objected to making one of the party, though he did not care to dissuade them from the proposed quest.

Nevertheless, he made a secret gesture with his hand, caught only by Buck Barber, which seemed to mean that worthy should go ahead; and Buck was just in the humor for doing it without asking questions. He was shrewd enough to note that the feeling between Clymer and the Silk Hat Detective was none of the best, and perhaps thought it might breed "fun" in the near future.

When some little arrangement had been made for their course, the three cautiously crept away in the direction of the late camp of the outlaws, half hoping, half fearing, they would find the nest empty and the birds flown.

It was not likely the bandits would expect an attack, and with the advantages of a surprise, the three had little doubt, if every man did his duty, they would be thrown into confusion; but while of the three each had unlimited confidence in himself, he was not so sure of his companions. And to play a lone hand made the odds of twelve to one rather great, even for Cyclone Pete.

"Good luck go wid yez," muttered Tim to himself, as he saw the party turning away.

"Av Mистер Clymer thinks he can give me a poult undher dhe belt seducin' me into dhe darruk he's moighty far off his aigs. Oi'll say thim latter on."

"What is that you say?" asked Miss Carmen, turning sharply upon him.

Though she had not appeared to notice the conversation of a moment before, she could hear Timothy's soliloquy, which made him think perhaps she was wider awake than he had been giving her credit for.

"Oi'll be braver be daylight. Oi always wor a coward in dhe dark," answered Tim, promptly. "Whin Oi can say phat's goin' on I'm riddy az any, wan for a ruction."

"The dawn is coming now; it will be light enough before they will risk such a move, and it would have been better for you all to have kept together. I am safe enough here, and would have willingly remained alone. It is not too late to overtake them."

"Thanks, but Oi'm more comphortable where Oi am," and McGonnigan threw himself down lazily.

As Miss Carter said, it was rapidly growing lighter, and perhaps Timothy had a reason for crouching low as he peered off in the direction taken by the three.

If there were any watchers prying about the spot, they could not so easily see him.

Minute after minute passed, and still no sound came in to tell the explorers had struck the enemy. In spite of himself, Timothy began to show signs of nervousness. He rubbed his jaw, scratched his head, and finally turned to Miss Carmen, who waited with a listlessness hard to understand.

"Be me sowl, ye b'ate the deck. It's meself az cannot shtand it, at all, at all, an' Oi'm goin' down to see what has become av the b'yes. Rist aizy, me darlint. Y'er safe, onnyfow."

With strange care for one who seemed so certain of the safety of the position, he crept down the hillside, and had Carmen been trying to watch his progress, he would soon have faded from her sight without her being able to tell how.

Timothy had been gone for some time, but at the rate he was progressing when last seen he could not have got half way to the camp of the outlaws when, on the morning air, there rose a sudden crash of firearms and a chorus of yells.

Carmen clasped her hands and bent forward.

The battle was joined; how would it go?

The chance of her own danger seemed to give her no trouble. Step by step, slowly but surely, she moved forward toward the sounds. Now and then she halted to listen; but as often again went on.

It might have been better if she had remembered the warning which McGonnigan had several times repeated. He had more than hinted that there was danger here, more than lurked in the hidden dingle below.

As she leaned forward in one of her pauses, a slight noise in the rear caused her to turn suddenly. It was too late.

At that instant a man was giving what seemed a leap of half a dozen yards. He dropped right at her side, caught her around the waist before there was time for cry or resistance, and, swinging her clear of the ground, began to bear her back over the path she had come.

Carmen caught but one glimpse of this man, and then fainted in his arms.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE GOLD BUGS SHOW THEIR METTLE.

The three men went silently down the hillside, looking this way and that, with weapons ready to hand. It did not seem possible they should be surprised.

Their steps were slow, and the advance seemed to be but inch by inch. Not one of them but was wise enough to know not a chance must be thrown away.

It was natural enough, with three such men, that neither of them would care to remain in the rear.

Upon one flank was the Silk Hat Detective; upon the other the banker, while Buck Barber was between.

In this way they advanced, spreading out imperceptibly, but more and more.

Notwithstanding each ear was open to catch the slightest sound, there was not a breath of noise to indicate the presence of others, and so far as eyesight could go there was no one to be seen. It seemed as though they were acting with unnecessary caution.

A little inequality of the ground caused their routes to diverge a trifle more, and it was then the unexpected happened.

Up around Wayne Clymer arose a dozen figures, and the nearest three covered him promptly; while the rest paid their attentions to his companions.

"Hands up, Clymer!" shouted a voice, which at that moment, like a flash, the detective recognized as belonging to the young outlaw who had led the road-agents in the attack upon the stage.

"We've got you again, and this time we risk no more funny business. If we can't keep you alive, we'll send in your corpse, to show Running Gear how we serve men who break faith with us."

Every word was spoken coolly, and came to the ears of the banker, though for the rest they were drowned in a fusillade which broke out.

Yet, sudden as was the attack which took Clymer unawares, the two men on his right were not caught in the same trap. Before the first flash came they had thrown themselves forward upon the ground, firing as they fell. The distance was too great for accurate shooting when triggers were pulled in such haste, but neither bullet was thrown away.

None of the outlaws fell, but there were two of them barked more or less deeply.

Had the rest rushed on, firing as they came, the two might have been lost; though at a sacrifice on the part of the bandits.

They knew a game worth two of that, and almost immediately a sharp whistle gave a signal they understood. Clymer had thrown up his hands, and the order was to retreat.

At the same time, the chief of the road-agents, as he seemed to be, with one hand clutching his pistol and the other an upraised arm of Wayne Clymer, swung in toward the centre, in such a way as to more or less cover the movement of his men.

He himself might perhaps be picked off, but it was more than likely the banker would go with him.

Meantime, two of the outlaws had dodged down so that any charge for the rescue of Clymer could be met by a cross fire from the flank, and the position they took sheltered them to such an extent that any forward movement on the part of the two against them would be full of risk.

The banker appeared to have all his wits about him, surprised though he had been; and though he yielded readily to the situation, he did not neglect the interests of his companions.

He spoke a few words in a low tone, and then called out:

"It's no good here, and you may as well pull off, unless you want to send me up the flume. The first move you make down I go, so, you can make up your minds and take your choice. I swear you ought to give me a chance for life. They don't want you, and if you'll sheer off they won't bother, and everything will be all right when the man gets back from town with the rocks. If you try it and they don't keep the truce, then shoot, and shoot to kill. I'll take what I get without a grumble."

"All right. You're the doctor," retorted Cyclone Pete. "I'm not just so spoiling for a fight as I was, and I guess Buck ain't going to ram his help down the throat of a man who don't want it. If they say, flag of truce, we'll be ready to get back only too quick. But I'm always ready to fight at the drop of the hat when the other fellow looks like crowding. Which is it to be—peace or war? And if we leave you this time, it is going to be for good, unless they come back on us."

"Peace it is, till you can get to Running Gear!" shouted the road-agent chief.

"And if you break the terms, it will be awful sickly for Mister Clymer."

"So long, then; and it's hoping I am that we won't see you later."

Without the least hesitation the sport rose up, and with a careless nod in the direction of the outlaws, stepped away, while Buck sullenly followed.

He was a good hater, but the more of this man he saw the better he understood he was several notches above him.

It really looked as though the honors were about even between the two and the dozen.

It is true, there had been a loss of one as a prisoner of war, but he took his capture as a matter of necessity; while the survivors marched out with all the honors of war.

Moreover, if the banker was lost, they were still between the outlaws and Miss Carmen, which softened the failure they had made.

Whether the bargain would be lived up to remained to be tested, but any way they were very little worse off for the effort. Unless the advantages were all in their favor, the bandits would be slow about attacking three resolute men, who shot quick, and had no objections to killing.

So the two thought as they made their way back, feeling, nevertheless, a little ashamed to meet the inquiring gaze that was soon to be turned on them in the light of the early morning.

"Go a leetle slow," whispered Buck, giving a glance backward over his shoulder rather than to the front.

"Tim's a mighty keerless man with his tools, an' might sling a bit ov lead over this way ef he heard us a kimin' too fast, an' didn't know jest who we be."

"Great Scott! Tim isn't there—neither is the girl!"

The Silk Hat Detective had already searched the spot where they had left the two, and detected that both were missing.

"S'uthin's happened, then!" answered Buck, springing forward as he spoke.

He could see for himself, and did not believe his pard would either desert his comrades or fail to take care of Miss Carter.

They had come back a great deal more quickly than they went, but there had still been time for Carmen and her captor to get well out of sight. When no traces were found of the missing two, in the first hasty search, it was but natural to believe they had gone off together.

"Lit out fur Runnin' Gear, by mighty. We better skip, too."

"No. Hold! Look!"

Above them crouched a man, holding in front of him what seemed to be the inanimate figure of Carmen Carter. His face was covered with the black mask of the outlaws, and in his one free hand he grasped a revolver.

Through the eyelet holes of his mask he glared down on them. Though his weapon was not leveled, he seemed ready for a snap shot; and there was little doubt that if he took it it would count.

For an instant there was silence. Then, the man in the mask waved his weaponed hand in a gesture there was no mistaking.

It plainly said:

"Pass on, and you are safe. Trouble me, and it is at your risk, and that of the lady."

"Euchred again!" exclaimed Smith, in a tone of disgust.

"Both bowers and the ace against us. Reckon we'd better get back to Running Gear, and let something like a man run this. We ain't fit for the crowd."

Buck Barber had already turned and stepped out. In a low tone he muttered:

"Git him off'n his guard, an' then throw in a snap shot. Don't say nothin', but my pard are comin' now; an' he ain't comin' alone."

"And, by heavens! some one else is coming. What is the meaning of that?"

The masked man thrust away his revolver and drew a knife, which he held poised over the breast of his captive, while from beyond they heard the clatter of coming feet.

Was it friends or foes who were approaching?

CHAPTER XXXI.

McGONNIGAN'S COUP.

Buck Barber was mistaken, ater all. It was not Tim McGonnigan who came, but half a dozen of the outlaws; and Wayne Clymer with them.

From his higher position the silent man in the mask had seen them first of all, a moving shadow catching his eyes.

Prompt though his first motions had been, he hesitated; and then the hand of the Silk Hat Detective flew up, a second or two later a sharp report cut the morning air.

The stranger had partially turned his head; but Carmen still protected his

body. It was at his hand that Cyclone Pete took the snap shot, for he did not care to risk doing Carmen an injury by some possible mischance, while he saw that the time had come to do something in her aid.

Shot never could have been sent more true.

The knife dropped from the hand which had been holding it, and Carmen slid through the other arm to the ground.

At the same time, shots were fired from the knot of bandits, and, though they were not quite near enough for accurate shooting, the bullets whizzed uncomfortably close.

The lone man neither dodged nor winced, but suddenly darted away, without turning a single glance toward Carmen, who lay where she had fallen.

With a yell the outlaws followed, taking Wayne Clymer along with them; while Cyclone Pete sprang to the side of the young lady.

He caught her up, only pausing to make note that it was a swoon, and not death, which held her motionless. Then he made his way toward the spot where he had left Buck.

The latter was puzzled, but nothing loath to move, even though he grumbled as he went along:

"Now yer sees him, an' now yer don't. This time ett 'peared ter me Clymer went too willin'. What's ett all erbout?"

"Let Clymer look after himself. It's my idea there's one of that gang who ain't his solid friend. If that sport in the mask isn't working more for blood than booty, I don't know."

"Reckon yer don't. I ain't gamblin' he b'longs ter ther gang ett all. I made sure ett war Tim comin' up ter ther res'ky. Wonder whar he's got to."

"Never mind Tim; he can take care of himself. What we want to do is to get back; and if they come at us again, shoot on sight. If I could have got the chance I would have held level on that chap's brain box, and something tells me that would have helped us out a heap. If his skull was only as sore as his fingers I'd hope not to see him on the way in."

Cyclone Pete knew his burden was reviving, and with that knowledge gave her little further attention. For the present, his only desire was to get as far away from the spot as possible, even though, if the agents should prove pertinacious, it might be impossible to shake them off without a battle.

Nevertheless, now that he had taken his growl at Buck, he turned his attention once more to Carmen.

It seemed strange how fate made him her champion. Every time, it seemed to him, it was he who came to the rescue; and though, so far, his help had been always only temporary, that was not altogether his fault. What under heavens was the reason she always wandered off with Clymer, and never went with him?

He was struck with her appearance when they first met, and he owned to himself that perhaps it was as well she had so clearly shown her preference for the banker.

But, this time, whether she wanted it or not, he did not intend they should separate until he had placed her in the comparative safety of Running Gear.

After that, she might go her way; and if she cared more for the company of Wayne Clymer—it was her own lookout.

He was thinking something like this—and the current of his thoughts did not flow as smoothly as they might have done—when he became aware that Carmen had recovered from her swoon.

As he looked down into her face he saw it was recovering its color—that if the bloom had not so thoroughly deserted her cheek, a superabundance of it might possibly have been there.

"Put me down, put me down," she said, peremptorily. "You must think I am the veriest child, and I begin to believe it myself. This is twice I have

fainted since coming to this miserable region. Where is he? Did you see him? Are we safe?"

Her questions came as an after thought; but they were none the less anxiously delivered.

"Safe as a church," answered Mr. Smith, cheerfully.

"When I last saw the gentleman who seemed to be paying you such particular attention he was striking for the tall timber, with half a dozen of the Goldbugs on his trail. From the attentive way they got down to business, I should remark he was probably paying more thought to his own affairs than to yours, and you will hardly be apt to see him again. If he has not already climbed the golden stairs, his feet were set in that direction at last accounts."

"And Mr.—Clymer?"

"Oh, he is all right. Stayed behind to bring up the rear. No doubt he will turn up before long. I have observed he is a mighty hard man to down."

Carmen smiled feebly.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Back to town. This time it is a sure thing."

"I hope so, but I am getting tired of it all. I begin to think I will be buried along the road—and, do you know, I don't much care."

Barber overheard, and sniffed disgustedly, but said nothing. He was in the mix, now, to stay, but he had no great love for either of the two to whom his rough ideas of chivalry bound him. He would have preferred to have Tim McGonnigan alongside of him; and from time to time he looked anxiously around, as if half expecting to see the Irishman appear.

As time passed on, however, and nothing was seen of him, the gameness with which the young lady struggled along began to attract his unwilling admiration, and he would have shot as straight as he knew how had the outlaws returned to the charge.

When he heard a crashing sound of hoofs in the rear, he turned at bay, at the same time telling his companions to keep on until he rejoined them. It was not the best place to make a stand, but he thought he could hold off the pursuit until they had made a better spot further on.

"Steady, Buck," answered Smith, turning at the same time, and taking a keen look in the direction of the sound.

"It don't appear to be a very dangerous army; and it may be there is a friend on the wing."

"Friend, nothin'," growled Barber, but just then Clymer burst into view.

He was mounted on horseback, and as they first saw him, was looking back over his shoulder.

Turning again, he caught sight of the trio, and gave a shout of triumph.

"Made the raffle!" he exclaimed, drawing up a moment later among them.

"When I get into their clutches again it will be after this. But, it's been a close shave."

"And our friend in the mask? Did he make it, too?"

"That's just it. He gave them the chase of a life, and, as far as I know, he's running yet. That let me out. While they were all mixed up on the trail I slid out, and, as you see, didn't exactly come alone. I had an eye to Miss Carter, or I never would have run the risk."

"Who was he? Looked like one of the gang; but they seemed to have it in for him, all the same."

"So they did, though I'll never tell you more about him. Now, Miss Carmen, your humble servant is willing to foot it the balance of the journey, but he does not intend that you shall. Down I come and up you go. The road is open now, and, if anything happens to us, all you have to do is to turn your face to the sun and follow on till you strike the river. Follow that, and it will take you to Running Gear. Up you go."

While he talked he dismounted him-

self, and put Carmen in his place. Then, with the same air of possession he had all along shown, he strode along at the side of the fair equestrian.

Buck grinned, and gave a side glance at the Silk Hat Detective, who never even winced. He began to be used to this sort of thing.

In fact, he was getting into that tired, dogged humor, when nothing can either please or give offense, and the world rolls on in a nightmare.

There was something of a journey yet before them, but they bent resolutely to the task, and it seemed as though fate was tired of persecuting them. The pursuit they imagined would follow failed to come, and as they struck the trail along the river bank they felt as though they did not care if it did.

So the man from Philadelphia hinted, but Buck said nothing.

He had watched the trail keenly, but if he had found any traces of his partner he failed to mention it.

As they drew near to the town at last, the line of danger seemed to have been passed, and it was without alarm, but with a sense of safety, they saw several horsemen dashing out to meet them.

"Great Jupiter! What locomotive powers that pard of yours must have!" exclaimed Smith, as he narrowly scanned the approaching horsemen. "He's routed up the town and started on the back track already."

"That's his kind," answered Buck, with a glow of pride. "Allers on deck, an' ther right sort ter tie to. But, I swear, I d'unno ther rest ov ther gang."

It made little difference to the fugitives that the men who dashed up with a yell were strangers. McGonnigan at their head was a guarantee that they came with friendly intentions.

There were a few words of explanation, and the cavalcade wheeled and went back with them toward the town.

And then, just as they reached the limits of the burg, there occurred a marvelous thing.

With a deftness which Cyclone Pete himself could not have surpassed, Tim McGonnigan whipped out a pair of revolvers, and covered the banker.

"Hands up, Captain Goldbug!" he cried. "Oi've got yez dead to roights, and very foul."

And Wayne Clymer's hands went up, while Carmen Carter gave a scream, and slid off her horse.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A TOUGH TUSSLE.

At that minute the most astounded man in the outfit was Buck Barber.

Cyclone Pete smiled with his lips, though there was something like a frown in his eyes as they ran from the two facing each other to the woman whose white face told how the sudden announcement had unnerved her.

In a voice shaky with anger Buck Barber spoke:

"Tim McGonnigan, hev yer bin playin' me that low down?"

"Sorry, pard, but me jooty requoired it," was the reply.

"An' me thinkin' yer war squar' an' white, w'ile all ther time yer war on'y a meazly, bog-trottin', life-stealin' der-tective. Ett makes me sick."

"Sure, an' it's sorry Oi am, but Oi picked yez up phor wan av the Bugs, thimselves. Whin Oi found yez wor innocent av bein' onny thing but a blamed fool, it wor too late to drap yez. Stiddy, Misther Archie Carter. Av yez can't be aizy be aizy az ye kin."

An uneasy movement of the banker brought the warning, and at the steely ring in the voice of the Irishman h' arms stiffened again.

"Yer played me dirt, Tim McGog-gan," continued Buck, not noticing interruption; "dog-gone yer, I'll re in ther mud!"

As he howled out his threat has a forward; and for a moment the

confusion of which one man was swift to take advantage.

Wayne Clymer had been picking out his choice, and with a tigerish bound he leaped at one of the men, who seemed to be the best mounted of them all.

Some one fired a shot, but it only made confusion more confounded. With a quick turn of the wrist, Clymer canted the man out of the saddle, and then bounded into his place. Just as Buck and the Irishman closed in a fierce struggle, he darted away.

"All right, Mr. McGonnigan, it's your circus," muttered the Silk Hat Detective, the words coming from his lips with a trifle of bitterness.

"I never was worse fooled in my life. You folks can run the riot."

And with arms folded he coolly watched the proceedings, making no effort to interfere, or to stop the fugitive.

If Tim had not known his late pard better than the most he would probably have shot, then and there, and ended the fracas, so far as he was concerned, by a touch of the trigger.

All his Irish blood was up in arms, any way, and he was not the sort of a man to refuse any sort of satisfaction asked from him.

For a few minutes there was a lively ruction on the ground.

It was this side play which seemed to be about to work the salvation of Clymer. The men who had come with Tim looked after their leader at first, and the ci-devant banker had already obtained a fair offing when they thought of him.

Then, when Buck lay on his back, and McGonnigan was joweling him down several shots were fired.

The horse gave a desperate plunge, but the rider remained upright, and apparently unscathed. Before another bullet could reach him the two plunged down into a gulch, and were hidden from sight.

"We got him!" cried the man who had fired the shot. "Let those blamed fools fight it out."

Followed by his companions, he dashed away toward where he had last seen the banker.

The horse had turned sharply up the gulch, and they followed without hesitation; but in the course of a few rods they came upon the animal in its death struggles, while Clymer was nowhere to be seen.

By this time Buck Barber had a blackened eye, a bloody nose, and a bruised jaw, while McGonnigan was free to follow to the gulch. Cyclone Pete followed him.

The men had plunged on up the ravine in hot pursuit, but Tim halted by the dead horse, and looked around for some traces of a trail.

"It's not my put in, Timothy," remarked the Ever Ready Sport, "but if I might be allowed to remark, I would say that the trail will lead straight to Clump's cabin, if I'm not an utter blamed fool, as I half suspect I am. I'll go along, just to make sure of my standing. Bless my soul! to think that girl was his sister all the time. Wonder how Miss Templeton is going to come in?"

He was to find that out later on.

The opinion of the sport was not merely founded on guesswork.

He had at the outset decided that the mysterious partner of Wesley Clump was, none other than the missing Archie, and that Clump had learned the identity of Carter, and that he, in turn, had been miner, road-agent, and banker. Had Wesley known it from the start, he never would have had Cyclone Pete start in on the search which might prove fatal to the pard to whom the one-legged man was undoubtedly true.

Now, with his horse broken down, and the chance to escape narrowed to a game of hide and seek, what more natural than

Carter should double on his pursuer and seek refuge with the one man upon whom Running Gear would not be apt to sus-

A few moments later, as they approached the cabin where Smith had held his interview with the man of the wooden leg, Smith and the Irishman caught sight of a female figure before them, evidently bound in the same direction.

The lady was Miss Tamar Templeton, and she looked neither to the right nor to the left as she sped along.

Behind her trotted the boy known as Clippers. As Tamar Templeton came near to the cabin, the two detectives gained on her, but she seemed to be unaware they were drawing in, but as something beyond attracted her attention she gave a cry, and transformed her hurried walk into a rush.

First, she had heard the voice of Wesley, chanting another verse of his hymn to the Cripple's Friend.

Then, there had been a strange crash, like to the jingle of breaking glass; after that, a cry and the report of a pistol. After that, silence.

At the door she never halted, but flung herself right at it. It yielded before her, and she vanished from the sight of the two men who were watching as they hurried on.

Then, with a few more bounds, Cyclone Pete and the Irishman stood on the threshold, and looking in saw a strange spectacle.

Wesley was crouching in a corner, more than half seas over, but his song had died on his lips.

A broken sash showed where an intruder had sprung into the room, and on the floor he lay, the man of the mask. Wayne Clymer's bullet had sped true, even though it had come a shade too late to save himself.

Near by lay the banker bandit, who so long, and with such skill, had disguised his identity, and who had, with the assistance of his band, hoped to cast it altogether away. The knife of the assassin had been destined to prove more fatal than the meshes of the law.

Midway between them stood Tamar Templeton.

"As heaven is my witness, I never knew!" she moaned, looking from one to the other. "Not until it was too late. But, I would have saved them both."

Clymer heard, and they were the last words which reached his ears.

He smiled as he heard them; and his face stiffened in the smile.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE CLOSE OF THE CAMPAIGN.

It was a little hard to convince Running Gear of the facts which lay behind the tragedy at Wesley Clump's cabin. There was even some talk about lynching everybody connected with it in the remotest degree.

Indeed, the average citizen never did get the rights of the story, though Tim McGonnigan and Mr. Smith both managed to clear their skirts and give satisfactory evidence that they were themselves above suspicion.

Tamar Templeton kept a close mouth for the rest of the world; but to the Silk Hat Detective, and the few others who were officially interested in the affair, she told enough to give them a fair understanding of the tragedy, especially as Mr. Smith had years before learned some points which had a bearing on the case.

The man with the mask had not been a member of the Goldbugs at all. Years before there had been a vendetta between the Templeton and Carter families—as it will be best to name them, to avoid confusion by introducing other names at this late stage.

A brother of the Templetons—and the man of the mask was also Tamar's brother—had been killed; and the survivor killed one of the Carters.

The circumstances were such in the latter case that, for a time, suspicion fell upon Tamar herself, since her brother was not only known to be a mute, but to

have been in another State, at least but a few days before the slaughter.

The other Carter left the country, and in the West played various parts, finally dropping entirely out of sight in his original character.

He could not, however, hide from the eye of hate or love, and Carmen, first sending him word that Templeton was on his trail, came herself to give further warning, and be near him. She knew of him as Archie Carter; but he was now seeking to drop that character, as well as that of the chief of the Goldbugs; and his men were willing to give him loyal assistance, for he had feed them well.

It is scarcely necessary to say that Tamar Templeton never recognized in the banker of Running Gear the slayer of her brother, nor did she dream that such a complication was possible.

Templeton, the mute, had ferreted out more than the detectives had been able to do, but he had not yet satisfied himself that the banker was the man known elsewhere as Archie Carter. He was, however, aware that Carmen was seeking her brother; and without a doubt had included her as one of the victims of the feud. He it was who attacked Carmen at the Bald Eagle; and, though she had wounded him with his own knife, yet he had begun to carry her away when some of the outlaws came to the rescue, under orders from their chief.

With Cyclone Pete behind her, it was not certain that Carter desired her to pursue the search for her brother, lest certain developments might be made. He intended to rescue her from the outlaws, but first of all she had to be prepared for a part; while Smith himself had to be led astray by what would seem convincing evidence.

Then, the madman on his trail had to be disposed of; Tamar won, and he would be ready to leave Running Gear with flying colors.

When Tamar Templeton recognized the Silk Hat Detective, she imagined he might be on the track of herself or brother, and took some risks to find out the truth. When the mute attacked Clymer her eyes began to open, though in all her thoughts she doubtless never imagined such a nightmare ending as that which took place at Clump's cabin, whither Clippers had guided her. Had her brother not come when he did, she might even have been off and away with the man who fell to his stroke, for suspicion was not certainty, and she was dangerously near to loving him.

Carmen was thoroughly broken up by the denouement; but Running Gear was very good to her, and, as administratrix of her brother's fortune, it is more than likely she touched capital acquired by his misdeeds. As Jack Potts put it:

"What's the odds? She's a game little woman, anyhow; and we can't be running around looking for a better owner when she's right here, as good as they make them."

There was more in the Cripple's Friend than outsiders had known, and Wesley got his full share out of it, leaving the place presently, somewhat under a cloud, but conscious of having done no direct evil.

Tim McGonnigan and his old-time friend never came together again. Buck never forgave the deceit which had made him the pard of a detective; while Tim blamed Barber as the direct cause of the tragedy at the cabin, and the loss of a very healthy reward.

And as for Mr. Smith—or, as he was better known, Cyclone Pete, the Silk Hat Detective—he went away the most thoroughly disgusted of all. For once in his life he had erred from start to finish, and never came within a mile of capturing his quarry. And without knowing how or why, he had given himself away most completely.

"Better luck next time," he muttered to himself, as the stage rattled out of Running Gear.

THE END.

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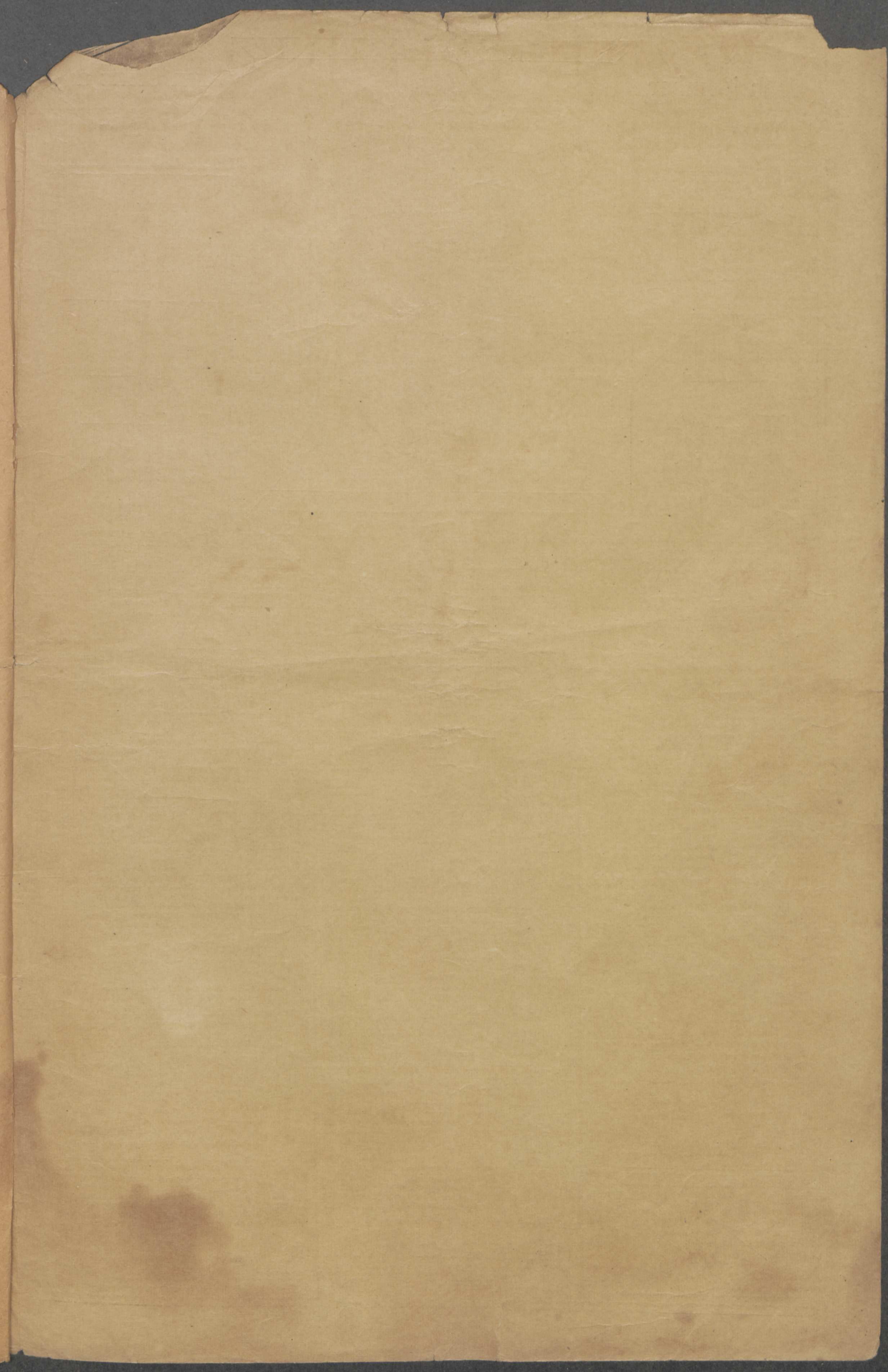
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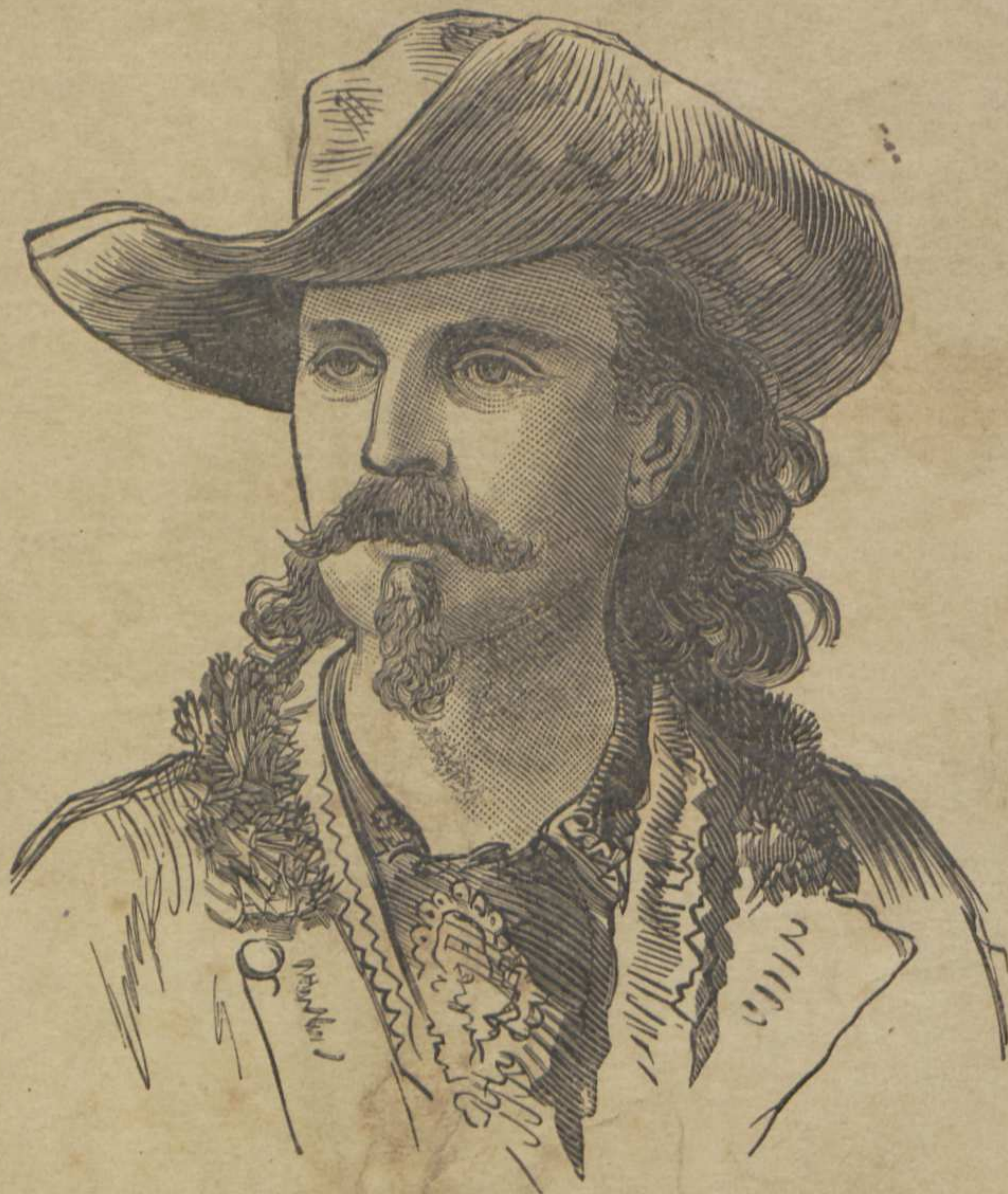
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